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Transitional Difficulties in Post-16 Education: Moving from GCSE to A Level studies

Carol Cort

BA (Hons), MEd

Doctorate in Education

**Centre for Research in Education and Educational
Technology (CREET)**

The Open University

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Dedication

Dedicated to my Father - John Nicol who continues to be my lifelong guide,
friend and quite simply my hero.

And to Robert and Sarah with all my love.

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Abstract

This research investigated transitional difficulties identified by learners moving from GCSE to A Level studies. A small-scale exploratory case study approach was used drawing on the principles of Grounded Theory. Research was bounded in the sixth form of a secondary school in Cambridgeshire. The sample included 147 participants aged 16-18 years. This was a purposeful sampling method including approximately 61% of the target population. 80 participants completed a questionnaire generating quantitative data, 40 participants completed a further questionnaire generating qualitative data, 19 participants took part in focus group meta-planning activities and discussions and 8 participants took part in individual interviews.

My epistemological position takes an integrated approach using positivist and interpretivist perspectives to generate knowledge through the breadth, depth and richness of data collection and analysis. My ontological assumptions for this research are based on critical realism, triangulation and mixed methods approaches.

Findings from integrated results using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) identify themes emerging from the data providing a variety of causes of transitional difficulties identified by participants when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Quantitative results were analysed using Complex Chi Squared non-parametric inferential statistical test. With 40 degrees of freedom and 0.005 level of significance, the critical value of chi squared (from the data) was 284.331 which was greater than the stated value of 66.766 Therefore, the results were significant. This means that the data gathered from the questionnaires does show that participants have experienced transitional difficulties when moving from GSCE to A Level studies.

Qualitative data was analysed using a constant comparative method to identify themes emerging from the data. Responses were noted, compared, coded and

categorised in a systematic way, compared further and put into responding groups based on the emerging themes.

Results found there are both internal and external factors that contribute to transitional difficulties for learners moving from GCSE to A Level studies. These highlight issues that can inform policy and practice to improve transition and educational outcome and identify areas for further research.

Chapter 1 – Introduction and Rationale

Introduction

Aims and Context of the research

The aim of this research is to identify transitional difficulties identified by learners when they move from GCSE to A Level studies. A small-scale exploratory case study approach was used drawing on the principles of Grounded Theory and using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006).

Research was bounded within the sixth form of a secondary school in Cambridgeshire. I was a teacher-researcher working within the school where the research was conducted. Participants were 16-18 year-old male and female sixth form students from a wide geographical location. The complexity of the participants including gender, ability range, social status and ethnic background and special educational needs were recognised as important but not specifically addressed to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Chapter 1 introduces this current research including the rationale, identifying transitional difficulties in key educational stages and the need for continued support for learners. The chapter includes reference to recent Government policies highlighting educational provision for young people including educational reform of A Level qualifications and introduces the aim of my research to identify transitional difficulties in post-16 education. The main research question will therefore be:

What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Chapter 2 explains the purpose of the literature review and provides a body of evidence to identify and evaluate current literature and research findings. It forms the basis of the conceptual framework for my own research to investigate how learners' experiences are shaped within social and educational contexts. It aims to go beyond learners' individual life histories, ambitions and personal circumstances, to consider their views on transition when moving from GCSE to A Level education.

Chapter 3 focuses on the research methodology explaining the overarching theoretical and philosophical framework which guide the research and the theoretical or conceptual framework in which the approaches and methods are situated. The chapter discusses positivist and interpretivist approaches; concepts of epistemology and ontology; and quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. The research methodology also provides a link between the theory and practise of research, formulating the research questions, determining the research approach, and data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 provides the results of data gathered using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) with consecutive phases to gain a better understanding of the research problem or questions raised. As proposed by Creswell et al. (2003) the quantitative phase was undertaken first followed by the qualitative phase, where the quantitative data and analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem which can then be refined by exploring participants' views in more depth within the qualitative phase. Results of both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated and will be considered further in the discussion section.

Chapter 5 discusses the results from quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, focus groups meta-planning and discussion activities plus a small number of individual interviews. Results are integrated from the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research; discusses the results in relation to the literature review; discusses the results in relation to the main research questions; and considered the results in relation to professional practice.

Chapter 6 draws conclusions from the research findings and identifies areas for possible further research.

Rationale

Recent decades have seen considerable change in educational policy and practice with a shift from selective education to the provision of ‘education for all’ within a national curriculum (Education Reform Act 1988). Changing government policies and initiatives have expanded curriculum choice, introduced curriculum change and reform to continually improve educational provision. However, despite continual reform there remains concern regarding underachievement of learners, especially between attainment at GCSE and subsequent A Level results (Lawton et al. 2004; Mendick, 2008; West et al. 2010; Department for Education, 2012).

Transitional difficulties have been identified as possible barriers to learning from an early age and continue through important key educational stages (Galton et al. 2000; Riele, 2004). There is considerable literature arguing the impact of school effectiveness on pupil outcome especially in the transition from primary to secondary school (Seidman et al. 1994; Woods et al. 1995; Galton et al. 2000) which indicates pupils are at the most vulnerable and likely to become disengaged with learning. Further transition between primary and secondary school suggests there is a shift from a state of certainty to a state of uncertainty (Schilling et al. 1988). This period of time is also one in which learners have to cope with changed learning environments whilst going through personal, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Legters and Kerr, 2001; Tonkin and Watt, 2003).

Poor subject choice and advice given to students has also has a substantial impact on learners’ motivation. This was emphasised by Foskett et al. (2004) arguing that there are qualitative differences in careers advice in schools with sixth forms compared to schools with 11-16 provision. However, those with sixth forms were shown to have a deficiency in the impartiality of advice and guidance in relation to post-16 choices where academic routes were actively promoted. In comparison schools with 11-16 provision only showed greater knowledge of post-16 training and the labour market. However, it was also found that the awareness of work-based routes was relatively lower across all school provision. The argument for the importance of subject choice and advice was further supported within the

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008) Report 00805 – Delivering 14-18 Reform: The Next Steps, which states that:

Developing excellent curriculum and qualifications and teaching and learning is key to raising participation and achievement. But together we must also ensure that young people get the right support to choose the course that suits them (p.10).

The report highlights the need for good quality careers and educational advice:

It is important that schools give young people good quality advice on their options for continued learning... we are legislating through the current Education and Skills Bill to require schools to deliver impartial careers education covering all options, including work-based learning routes such as Apprenticeships. (DCSF, 2008 p.43)

Emphasis is also placed on the vital need for excellent transitional support:

We will ensure that young people are provided with the guidance and support to overcome the barriers that may prevent them from making the right choice and then participating effectively. (DCSF, 2008 p.46)

Research reports and empirical evidence (Galton et al. 2000; Riele, 2004; and DCSF, 2008) have highlighted the need for improvement in careers and educational advice, there is little evidence of actual progress within schools in the development of improved careers and educational advice. The increased involvement in outside agencies, for example, the former Connexions Service (part of the Department for Education and Skills, introduced in 2001) has gone some way to support the provision of impartial advice on careers, education and the labour market. It was argued that perhaps this did not go far enough, often being restricted in the light of limited time and resource availability. The effectiveness of the Connexions Service has been criticised by Johnson et al. (2009) suggesting that the quality of the service provided varied between educational establishments and the needs of individual learners. Johnson et al.

(2009) further argued that teachers and some Connexion Advisors themselves often had narrow views on careers and educational advice, often being unclear on different pathways and alternative routes that may be available to learners including work-based learning, training and apprenticeships. Criticisms may also be levied at school careers advisors who may have limited professional training in career guidance (Office for Standards in Education, 2013).

More recent government policies including Laws et al. (2015) '2010-2015 Government Policy: Young People' highlight government views on continued participation in education, for example:

We want to increase the quality of education for young people so that they are well prepared for further education, higher education and work. We want to make sure that there are high quality options for young people to undertake both academic and vocational education, including apprenticeships and traineeships (p.1)

With continual changes in government educational policies and reform of A Level qualifications (Matthews and Pepper, 2007; Department for Education, 2012) there is still recognition that more needs to be done to address transitional issues at key stages of education to make learners more prepared for life in sixth form and beyond, to help learners not only enjoy education but to work towards reaching their full potential (Winter, 2001; Matthews and Pepper, 2007). These views were reflected in earlier work by Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identifying research within sixth form colleges as an under-researched sector of educational provision. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified two significant gaps in the literature; firstly, they suggest there are few studies on post-compulsory education and none on sixth form colleges. Secondly, they identify a dislocation between research studies of institutional culture and practices and new academic interests in learning which fail to identify and address possible issues relating to transitional difficulties faced by some learners. Further research including Galton et al. (2000) and Riele (2004) identified difficulties in adjustment which may lead to disengagement in learning that can

have a subsequent negative impact on future life chances, for example, in terms of successful entry into the workforce.

Going beyond compulsory and post-16 education research has also shown transitional difficulties in learners moving from A Level to university. Peel (2000) identified levels of preparation, expectation and experience at university that had measurable impact on learners' transitional experiences, with the need to focus on individual needs of students rather than identifying group characteristics. These views were also reflected in research by Green (2005) arguing that universities offer places solely based on A Level examination performance, this failing to address transitional issues. Green (2005) also comments that there is a lack of developing pedagogical practices to meet the changing needs of the student body, by failing to respond in their teaching to perceptible student needs and this is likely to exacerbate students' difficulties in transition and to impact on retention.

Further Government reforms that introduce changes to educational policy include Department for Education (2009) 'The September Guarantee: education and training for young people' and Department for Education (2015) 'Policy Paper 2010 to 2015 Government Policy: school and college qualification and curriculum'. In their report 'Beyond 2000: Science Education for the Future' Millar et al. (1999) gave support to government views for the need to challenge educational provision to meet the needs of a global economy. It provided one of the most influential research reports in education since The Plowden Report (1967). Millar et al. (1999 p.5) suggests major recommendations for change, identifying that:

Education at the end of the 20th Century no longer prepares individuals for secure, lifelong employment in local industry or services. Rather the rapid pace of technological change and the globalisation of the marketplace have resulted in a need for individuals who have a broad general education, good communication skills, adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning.

The report emphasises the need for practical investigation and inquiry. It also suggests that there is a need to 'appreciate strengths and limitations of scientific

evidence, learners need to be able to make sensible assessment of risk, and to recognise ethical and moral implications of choice that science offers' (Millar et al. 1999 p.8). However, the report can be criticised as it has limited focus on science and mathematics, to the exclusion of all other school subject areas within and beyond the national curriculum.

Changes in legislation have also had an impact on the provision of post-16 learning. For example, the Education and Skills Act 2008 introduce requirements of young people to remain in education or training beyond the statutory school leaving age. The Act contains measures to encourage more young people to participate in learning post-16 and to achieve higher levels of skill and qualifications. As a result, in England, by 2013 all 17 year olds and by 2015 all 18 year olds are required to continue education or training.

These changes will have a substantial impact on class sizes and the limited resources that are often available within schools (Winter, 2001; Lawton et al. 2004). These changes may themselves lead to further transitional difficulties for future learners in the 16-19 age range, thus giving rise to the importance of making the transition from GCSE to A Level studies vital and even more effective.

Criticism was also raised by The Children's Society (2011) which suggested that transitional support for students moving into post-16 education is often poor. In their consultation with 19 young people about their experiences of education in York, they noted that none of the students in post-16 education with learning difficulties had received support with the transition from secondary school to post-16 education. They suggested a more robust and systematic approach to transition across schools was called for, particularly in transition between school and college. In order to effectively engage young people age 16 – 19 in education, it is important that they have been engaged and supported earlier in their school careers. (It should be noted that there is a substantial body of literature referring to transition in special needs education, which is beyond the scope of this current research, however, The Children's Society raise important criticisms into recognition of transitional difficulties across all learner's abilities).

Introduction of government policies including Department for Education (2009) 'September Guarantee' provide guidance for local authorities and partners including schools, colleges, training providers, and the Learning and Skills Council. It agrees that the transition from compulsory education to post-16 learning is a critical time and whilst many young people make successful transition, there are others who do not. The September Guarantee provides that all young people who reach statutory school leaving age will be entitled to an offer of a suitable place in post-16 education or training. In a critique of the September Guarantee it can be argued that measurement of the success of the scheme was only based on the 'offer' of a suitable place; it is not a requirement that the young person actually accepts the place. Similarly, although identified as a provision for all young people, there are many who are still excluded from the scheme, for example, those with health issues, those serving custodial sentences, young people with no fixed abode and others that are difficult to contact, such as the travelling community. As with many schemes and government initiatives, the need to work and share information between different providers may, in itself, prove difficult to fully monitor the success of the scheme and the benefits to young people.

A further critique of the September Guarantee was provided by East Sussex Local Authority who reported that for the period 2006-2007 14% (over 700 learners) refused or were not made an offer under the September Guarantee, and of those, many could not be contacted (Circular 038/208 East Sussex Local Authority). National figures are likely to be substantially higher. This would suggest a failure of the September Guarantee to achieve its own aims and objectives. This makes it questionable why the government are introducing yet more initiatives including the January Guarantee, when earlier initiatives are failing to meet their own targets. In terms of the current study this emphasises that whilst it is acknowledged that there is a critical time in transition from compulsory education to post-16 learning, very little appears to have been done to aid this transition. Under the September Guarantee it can be argued that the mere 'offer' of a suitable place does not help engage or encourage some young people to progress into and through post-16 learning and takes no steps to address the transitional

difficulties that may be encountered by some young people as they progress from GCSE to A Level studies.

Laws et al. (2015) '2010-2015 Government Policy: Young People' highlights the way the government plan to:

- Improve education – including reform of A Level qualifications, and to increase the quality of apprenticeships and introduce new traineeships (p.2).
- Supporting more young people to study beyond the age of 16 – including making sure that young people receive careers advice that opens their eyes to the world of work (p.2).
- Provide widening opportunities – including protecting vulnerable young people from harm, and reducing youth crime and increasing support for young offenders (p.3).

The need for good quality vocational courses including apprenticeship and traineeships, and high quality guidance and support were also emphasised in an earlier research review by Spielhofer et al. (2007). They found that successful transition into learning in post-16 education was dependent on young people's career exploration skills and awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. Spielhofer et al. (2007) argue that young people will not take advantage of new opportunities unless they are fully aware of them, and are then able to select most appropriate pathways. Discussions with family members and professional advisors would enable young people to make choices in the light of full knowledge of available options together with the individual interests and skills of the young person.

In earlier research Jones (2002) criticises government reform in relation to A Level examinations arguing that educational policies depend on public belief in the value of education, 'the education ethos' with the erosion of state support for students, people need to be doubly sure that their personal investment in education will be worth it. Unfortunately, the benefits of post-16 education are not always immediately apparent.

Jones (2002) suggests education is seen as the principle means to overcome poverty and disadvantage. For education to be effective for young people there needs to be encouragement to engage in education and training opportunities rather than to enter the impoverished youth labour market. Jones (2002) also suggests that there is a need for a new curriculum to re-assess post-16 qualifications as these are currently targeted a university entry rather than entry to the workplace. Jones (2002) lends support to earlier research by McGivney (1993) identifying that one of the most important barriers to learning is the relative cost of education. Many students continue with extended education with the view that they will gain in the long term through enhanced earnings. In contrast, some learners will leave education as they see it as a poor alternative to earning money in the workplace.

Hoyles et al. (2001 p.836) also criticised the system of A Level education. A Levels were introduced in 1951 'with the aim to provide a way of discrimination between university applicants'. Traditional A Levels had terminal examinations which the whole course was examined at the end of the two years of study. There was later a shift to modular examinations with the introduction of AS Level qualifications introduced by Office for Standards in Education (2001). The main rationale for the shift to modular examination was to improve results. Hoyles et al. (2001) argue that A Level changes, in particular, in Mathematics appear to have been driven by market forces rather than strategic vision. They conclude that A Level mathematics was no longer purely designed as a tool for serving the need of university mathematics. Barlow (2012) supports the earlier view of Hoyles et al. (2001) arguing that following the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) extensions in 1993 and the introduction of the Education Act, 1996 focus on Key Stage 5 (A Levels) and the National Curriculum, the direct influence of universities on A Level syllabus development has been reduced to almost nil. Over a decade later the arguments put forward by Hoyles et al. (2001) would still appear to be valid. These views also resonate with Mathematics in Education and Industry (2012) commenting that:

The existing A Levels in Mathematics and Further Mathematics could and should be improved, to increase the validity of assessment and to differentiate more effectively between the most able students (p.6).

The next major change in A Levels takes place from September 2015 when many A Levels will revert to terminal/linear examinations taken at the end of the two years of study. This can be seen in terms of reversing the introduction of the modular examinations and returning to the type of A Levels introduced in the 1950's. However, this poses questions as to why more than 60 years after the introduction of A Levels are the specifications not meeting the apparent needs of learners, universities, examining bodies and employers?

Chapter summary

This chapter provides an introduction to the thesis, identifying the aim of the research to identify transitional difficulties in post-16 education and introducing the main research question:

What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Continuing changes in government policies including The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) '2008 Report 00805 – Delivering 14-18 Reform: The Next Steps', and Laws et al. (2015) '2010-2015 Government Policy: Young People' have identified the need to deliver excellent curriculum and qualifications and teaching and learning to raise participation and achievement, and ensure that young people are provided with guidance and support to overcome barriers. Despite continual reform there remains concern regarding underachievement of learners, especially between attainment at GCSE and subsequent A Level results (Lawton et al. 2004; Mendick, 2008; West et al. 2010; DfE 2012).

Within various government policies including Department for Education (2009) 'The September Guarantee'; Laws et al. (2015) 'Policy Paper 2010 to 2015

Government Policy: school and college qualification and curriculum’; and Millar et al. (1999) in ‘Beyond 2000: Science Education for the Future’ have been in agreement in that they acknowledge transitional difficulties in education, however, very little appears to have been done to reduce these difficulties. In a critique of government policy on education Wilson (1994) focuses on the preconditions for successful educational policy and suggests that governments need to be clear about what education is, before they start making policy. These views resonate with Mendick (2008) arguing that policy and practice cannot, in a simple way, be used to solve problems of inequalities, for they are implicated in constructing those very inequalities.

Transitional difficulties have been frequently identified as possible barriers to learning from an early age and continue through important key educational stages (Galton et al. 2000; Riele, 2004). Nonetheless, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified research within sixth form colleges as an under-researched sector of educational provision. It is this under-researched area that is the main focus of this current thesis. The current research aims to add, albeit in a very small way, to research specifically within sixth form education focusing on transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the aims and rationale for this research, identifying transitional difficulties in key educational stages and took a brief look at changing Government policies in relation to education.

This chapter explains the purpose of the literature review and provides a body of evidence to identify and evaluate current literature and research findings. It forms the basis of the conceptual framework for my own research to investigate how learners' experiences are shaped within social and educational contexts. It aims to go beyond learners' individual life histories, ambitions and personal circumstances, to consider their views on transition when moving from GCSE to A Level education (see Appendix 1 Search Strategy and Appendix 2 Online Databases used in the Search Strategy).

The search strategy enabled development of the literature review narrowing and refining the scope of the search for items relevant to the current research topic with focus on several key aspects including:

- The purpose of the literature review
- Definitions of transition
- Sociological explanations of transition
- Transition as barriers to learning at key educational stages
- Models of transition
- Models of change

The literature review provides insight that led to the development of my three main research questions:

- 1. What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level Studies?**
- 2. What internal factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?**
- 3. What external factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?**

Purpose of the literature review

Hart (1998) emphasises that reviewing the literature can provide an academically enriching experience, where the review forms a foundation for the current research by providing a perspective on how the subject has become established and developed over time, identifying areas of current research and general areas of concern to be explored further.

Macintyre (2000) suggests the literature can help us to pinpoint a topic which would be both relevant and interesting for the researcher and contextually available. It helps us in focusing our thinking, lets us see what others have done and gives us examples to follow or in some cases to avoid. Similarly, Creswell (2003) explains that the literature shares with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the topic. It reflects a study of the larger ongoing dialogue in the literature about a topic, filling in gaps and extending prior studies. Creswell (2003) also highlights that the literature provides a framework for establishing the importance of a study and provides a benchmark for comparing results of a study with other research findings. Gray and Malins (2004) resonate with the views of Creswell (2003) in that a literature review allows you to acknowledge different contributions with both positive and negative responses, but also to provide efficient academic evidence to justify potential 'lack of research' in a given field.

Definitions of transition

There are several definitions of transition that can be used in an educational context, for example, Moos (1990) defines transition as a crisis or turning point that has significant disruption on established patterns of personal and social identity. Osgood et al. (2002) suggest that transition can be presented non-problematically, yet it has inherent difficulties, and can be increasing long and complex. Williams et al. (2008) explain transition as a key moment when trouble with the 'step up' in demand was experienced at the same time as social, intellectual and emotional challenges were being imposed (by the need to re-construct a peer group, by the increases in autonomy of the expected work and by the demands to be 'grown up').

However, these definitions can be criticised in that they emphasise the negative, problematic position of transition, suggesting trouble and difficulty. They fail to take into consideration any growing sense of autonomy or indeed the fact that transition can also be viewed in a positive light in opening new opportunities and choices for post-16 learners. Miles et al. (2002) propose an alternative, more positive, definition of transition as a developmental style where young people engage in the acquisition of knowledge and skills inherent to the demands of the life phase to come. Beach (2003) also defines transition with a positive outcome, where transition is considered as a developmental change in the relationship between an individual and one or more social activities. Beach (2003) identifies 'consequential transition' as a shift in the individual's sense of self or social position.

In a similar approach, Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) suggest transition can be seen in a more positive discourse, one of reported challenge, growth and achievement. Transition is not seen as an obstacle but as an opportunity to develop a new identity in which the person see themselves develop due to the distinct social and academic demands that the new institution creates, where the chance to become a new person can be explored by many learners.

Transition can, therefore, be described as a change, or a process of change or period of change in which something undergoes a change and passes from one

state or stage to another. There are many processes or stages of change or transition that learners go through within various key stages of education, for example, from home to nursery or playgroup, from playgroup to infant school, from infant to junior then on to secondary school (Schilling et al. 1988) and from secondary to post-16 education within sixth form (Winter, 2001; Lawton et al. 2004; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011) and again from sixth form to university (McQueen, 2009; Barlow, 2012). Having gone through many stages of transition and change before reaching sixth form this raises questions as to why some learners might find it difficult adjusting from GCSE to A Level studies.

Sociological explanations of transition

Moos (1990) defines transition as a crisis in a transition or turning point that has significant disruption on established patterns of personal and social identity. This suggests there are both aspects of social identity and personal identity within the conflict of transitional difficulties. Taylor (1989) suggests that in order to have a sense of who we are, we need to have a notion of how we have become, and where we are going. This view is expanded by Giddens (1991) who argues that self-identify is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual, but the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography. He further identifies that transition in individuals' lives have always demanded psychic reorganisation, something which was often ritualised in the traditional culture in the shape of *rites de passage*.

Giddens (1991) contrasts this with views of modernity, shifting from traditional cultures and suggests that modernity advocates that the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflective process of connecting personal and social change. Giddens' (1991) suggests that individuals need a sense of ontological security that will carry the individual through transitions and crises and circumstances of high risk. He defines ontological security as a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual.

A major link between Giddens' theoretical approach, reflection and ontological security can be seen in Bourdieu (1986) concepts of *habitus*, capital and field. He aims to connect his own conceptual or theoretical ideas with empirical research, grounded in everyday life in what he terms 'Theory of Practice'. Bourdieu (1986) provides a wide body of evidence through research where sociological methods are considered as part of the process of change.

Bourdieu (1986) does not provide a specific definition but offers a description of *habitus* as a combination of free will and determinism establishing mental structures through which individuals cope with the social world. It can be considered a set of internalised schemas through which the world is perceived, understood, appreciated and evaluated. Bourdieu (1986) argues that *habitus* both produces and is produced by the social world. Individuals internalise external structures and then externalise things that they have internalised through practices. *Habitus* is created through social interactions and practices leading to patterns that are enduring and transferable from one context to another. *Habitus* is not fixed or permanent but is socialised norms and tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking. It is the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act (Bourdieu, 1986). *Habitus* can also be used as a method of exploring children's relationships and culture through non-verbal behaviour and the use of language (Bourdieu, 1992). This can be compared to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis of linguistic relativity which suggests that the structure of language affects the ways in which its respondent speakers conceptualise their world and influence their cognitive processes, based on the idea that differences in the way language encodes culture and cognitive categories affect the way people think. Thus, creating a strong link between language, cognition and culture and socialised norms (Sapir, 1921).

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *habitus* also supports earlier views of Foucault (1972) and the notion of discourse which he describes as a system of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects of the worlds in which they speak. Foucault (1972) suggests discourse can be used to widen social processes of legitimacy and

power, emphasising the construction of current truth. Foucault (1972) proposes that it is through our actions that we accrue to our own rules and conventions that make up our social reality, making power, knowledge and truth 'current' and active in the social environment. It is societal values encompassed within the conduct and discipline in schools that shape student's self, their identities and understanding of truth.

Bourdieu (1986) also introduces the concept of 'capital' extending beyond the ideas of material assets, to capital that can be social, cultural or symbolic. Cultural capital and the means by which it is created or transferred from other forms of capital have an important role in society's power relationships as they provide a non-economic form of hierarchy. However, the shift from material to cultural and symbolic capital can to an extent be seen to produce and reproduce inequality. Bourdieu suggests that social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds through cultural products including educational systems, language, judgement, values and everyday activities leading to unconscious acceptance of social differences.

Bourdieu (1983 p. 249) describes social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. Symbolic capital refers to prestige, honour and attention which are considered to be critical sources of power. Through forms of mental representations, it is acknowledged and noticed as objective representations, as a sign or symbol. These signs and symbols transform language into an agency of power.

The concept of 'field' is the complement to the idea of *habitus*. A field can be described as a network, structure or set of relationships which may be intellectual, religious, educational, cultural, and so forth. Bourdieu used concepts of *habitus*, capital and field to create the perspective on 'constructivist-structuralism' as a method of bridging subjectivism (the individual) and objectivism (society). Structuralism forms an objective structure of language and culture that give rise to human actions, whilst constructivism considers the social aspects of schemes of perception, thought and action. Bourdieu (1986) considers social structures or objective structures with emphasis on how people perceive and construct their

own social world, without neglecting how perceptions and constructions are constrained by structures. He considers the importance of individual actors and the shift to invent and improvise within the structures of their routines. Bourdieu (1986) thus considers *habitus* as an important factor contributing to social reproduction as it is central to generating and regulating the practices that contribute to social life. Individuals learn to want what conditions make possible for them, but not to aspire to what is not available to them. Bourdieu (1986) also emphasises the importance of a reflexive society in which structuralist knowledge could be subjected to sociological scrutiny so as to reveal the covert social purpose behind the imposition of certain frameworks of conceptual order on the behaviours of individuals and societies possessing their own inherent motivations and self-understanding.

Reay (1995) relates to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* in that it should be seen as a method, a way of thinking about the social world which invites understanding of everyday practices as constitutive of social differences. Reay (1995 p.353) adds that the appeal of *habitus* lies in its ability to uncover social inequalities in a way that keeps agency and structure simultaneously in focus. Although Reay (1995) identifies problems of operationalising *habitus*, she explores how it can be used as a research tool, thus viewing *habitus* in a less problematic way as a method rather than a theory.

Reay (1995) used the concept of *habitus* as a method of analysing peer group interactions within the classroom. She undertook research in two primary schools in London with Year 5 children. The focus of the research was mothers' involvement in their children's education together with fifteen months of participant observations within the schools with emphasis on peer group interactions used to explore the extent to which the *habitus* of the classroom reflected the *habitus* of the home. The classroom was considered the forum in which the *habitus* of the home meets the *habitus* of the school, where children brought with them the dispositions and predispositions of the home. Using examples from field notes Reay (1995) illustrates that dispositions and predispositions of the home often had greater power and efficacy than those of the school.

In analysing the results Reay (1995) suggests that *habitus* is a way of looking at data which renders the ‘taken-for-granted’ problematic, raising a multitude of questions that are not necessarily addressed in empirical research, but also illustrates some of the potential of *habitus* to demonstrate the ways in which individuals continually make and remake structures through their activities. As a result of which, *habitus* allows for a conceptualisation of interactions rooted in social locations and powered by complex interaction. Thus Reay (1995) lends support to Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of *habitus* contributing to social reproduction through social interaction and practices and the continued development of internalised schemas.

In later writing Reay (2004) aims to draw on research examples that utilise *habitus* as a research tool to illustrate how *habitus* can be made to work in educational research. In Reay’s explanation of *habitus*, she refers to a complex internalised core from which everyday experience emanate. Choice is at the heart of *habitus* where choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints in the individual’s external circumstances. Reay (2004 p.435) suggests possibilities of the *habitus* lay within a continuum at one end of which *habitus* can be replicated through dispositions, at the other end of the continuum *habitus* can be transformed through a process that raises or lowers each individual’s expectations. Referring to Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992 p.134) description:

The *habitus* acquired in the family is the basis of the structuring of school experiences...; the *habitus* transformed by the actions of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences... and so on, from reconstructing to reconstructing.

Reay (2004) resonates with the notion of social reproduction through social interaction and that *habitus* is produced within early childhood experiences which are then socialised within the family and continually restructured by external factors including school. School acts as a general disposition leading to a *cultural habitus*. Reay (2004 p.441) concludes that *habitus* makes possible adaptation rather than constricting the concept of *habitus* within empirical work. Thus, supporting Bourdieu’s (1990 p.107) description of *habitus* ‘as an open concept designed to guide empirical work’.

In a critique of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* Sullivan (2002 p.152) comments:

I have complained that Bourdieu fails to express his theory clearly.
This failure is bound up with Bourdieu's rejection of what he
describes as '... positive conception of science ...' (Bourdieu, 1990).

Further criticism by Sullivan (2002) identifies that from his own evidence Bourdieu suggests that he does not engage in theory and does not theorise, rather he uses a set of 'thinking tools' which become visible from the results they produce, but fail to build a solid theory but a temporary construct which is shaped and developed through empirical work. Furthermore, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is not clearly defined, therefore, operationalisation is unclear. Sullivan (2002) adds further criticism in that Bourdieu emphasises the importance of linguistic competence, yet this appears to be ignored in much educational research.

Bourdieu's concept of social capital is supported by Coleman (1988) using rationale choice theory in which he describes the social context of education and academic debate. According to Coleman (1988) social capital is defined by its function with common characteristics of social structure and the methods by which individuals facilitate action with structure. However, Portes (1998) criticises the use of defining social capital by its function suggesting the same outcomes could be achieved from different processes.

Field (2003) offers an alternative description of social capital theory based on 'relationships matter' and the concept that 'social networks are valuable assets'. Field (2003) emphasises the importance of interaction which enables building of communities within which individuals commit themselves to each other, to develop a sense of belonging within the concrete experiences of social networks. This, I would suggest, supports the views of Giddens (1991) and Castanheira et al. (2007) emphasising the need to develop a sense of identity and belonging through interaction with others.

Further support for Bourdieu (1983) can be seen by Beem (1999) emphasising that the concept of social capital contends that building or rebuilding communities and trust require face-to-face encounters. Field (2003) also resonates

with the earlier work of Putman (1995) where Putman describes social capital in relation to connections among individuals, social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. He also emphasises the importance of social capital in terms of a sense of human well-being. Putman (1995 p.296) highlights the importance of social capital community stating:

Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. Trust networks and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group and larger community have far reaching effects on their opportunities and choices, educational achievements and hence their behaviour and development.

Bourdieu's (1981) social theory provides a way of understanding important features of the field of educational research. He produces a dynamic theory evolving over many years. He describes the concept of field as a structured social space with its own rules, schemes of domination and legitimate options. He emphasises that the primacy of field theory as the main determinant of objective scientific knowledge in analysing the purpose of research and the limits of the 'objectification subject'. Bourdieu considers field to be a tool of analysis where changes over time can be within the field itself and/or in response to outside influences. Bourdieu (2000) suggests fields lay within a continuum between autonomy and heteronomy, suggesting a field can generate its own problems rather than being externally generated. Bourdieu's thinking can promote reflexivity in terms of the changing nature of the field in educational research.

Ball et al. (1999 p.202) provide support for Bourdieu's social theory; they claim that situated decision-making by young people is 'constrained and enabled by their horizons in action'. Ball et al. (1999) suggest horizons are the external opportunities together with the subjective perceptions that are rooted in the identity of young people as individuals. Their identities are formed by life histories, interactions with others, experiences, social and cultural background, which are highlighted in the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bloomer (1999) identifies concerns of economic, social and cultural capital which influence life chances and learning careers. Bloomer (1999) lends support to Beck

(1992) and the postmodern view of risk and individuation. Uncertainly, individuation and risk in the learning pathways of young people were more evident for those of low socio-economic status and low cultural capital. Risks are thought to be ingrained in learners post-16 aspirations and decisions are often based on aptitudes. Bloomer (1999) proposes that some young people make post-16 decisions without critical engagement in pre-course decision making while *habitus* and cultural capital prevent them from considering alternative pathways. He suggests *habitus*, in its guiding and framing of learners' perceptions provides an underlying influence, whilst economic and cultural capital, define learners' relationships with their lives as a whole.

Castanheira et al. (2007) agree that pupil identities in school are not given, but are formulated in, and through, the developing discourse, practices and methods of structuring interactions. They describe identity as being a person within a group or the group itself, as in members of a nation, state, family, class, peer group, social group, ethnic group, language group or racial group. Castanheira et al. (2007) highlight the work of Bauman (2002) who argues that the shifting from modernity to post-modernity does not represent the dynamic relationships but the changing places that shape experiences of identity. Identity is not abstract but is based on the constructed patterns and discourses of everyday life which are constructed and reconstructed across time and events.

Williams et al. (2008) argue the need for 'identity in practice' to help understand how subjective engagement in practice may constitute learners' formation of social identity. Williams et al. (2008) use case study evidence to suggest that many students are not prepared to be autonomous learners, and that social aspects of transition were considered important in terms of choice of college and the process of settling in. However, one of the main criticisms of case study evidence is the lack of generalizability to the population as a whole.

Williams et al. (2008) use participant narrative to describe transition as a challenge, seen as a change of identity as a way of moving on, finding ways of overcoming problems and troubles. Transition is, therefore, considered as a question of identity where learners are expected to be autonomous. They conclude that transition is considered life-affirming and an opportunity to become

someone new, creating a new self-identity. Using identity-in-practice, the learner moves from the person I was to the person I have become. I will consider later whether the findings from my own research support these views of creating a new self-identity for participants within the transition from GCSE to A Level studies.

Transition as a barrier to learning at key educational stages

Transitional difficulties have been identified as possible barriers to learning from an early age and continue through important stages within educational provision. There is considerable literature arguing the impact of school effectiveness on pupil outcome especially in the transition from primary to secondary school (Seidman et al. 1994; Woods et al. 1995) which indicates that pupils are at the most vulnerable and likely to become disengaged with learning, with limited participation in activities, lack of interaction with others and lower self-esteem. Furthermore, transition between primary and secondary school suggests there is a shift from a state of certainty to a state of uncertainty (Schilling et al. 1988). This period of time is also one in which learners have to cope with changes in learning environments whilst going through personal, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Legters and Kerr 2001; Tonkin and Watt, 2003).

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified research within sixth form colleges as an under-researched sector of educational provision. They identified two significant gaps in the literature: firstly, they suggest there are few studies on post-compulsory education and none on sixth form colleges. Secondly, they identify a dislocation between research studies of institutional culture and practices and new academic interests in learning which fail to identify and address possible issues relating to transitional difficulties faced by some learners

Transitional difficulties have also been identified as possible factors leading to low retention rates in post-16 education (McQueen, 2009). Galton et al. (2000) and Riele (2004) identify difficulties in adjustment which may lead to

disengagement in learning which can have subsequent negative impact on future life chances, for example, in terms of successful entry into the workforce.

Gorard and Smith (2007 p.142) suggest that ‘what happens at age 16 could be critical for our understanding of inequalities in higher education because many 16-year-olds stay on to gain qualifications for higher education’. Students focus more on choice at age 16 rather than age 18. The authors comment that the extent to which young people participate in learning opportunities depends on the actions of individuals. The official model of how and why people continue in education which is based on a rather simple explanation of human capital theory which in turn can be identified in terms of barriers to participation. Individuals are deemed to participate in lifelong learning according to their calculations of the most economic benefit to be derived from education or training. Gorard and Smith (2007) identify different types of barriers to participation including: institutional barriers created by structures of available opportunities, dispositional barriers in the form of individuals’ motives and attitudes to learning and situational barriers based on life and lifestyle of the learner are often dependent on the relative cost of education.

Primary to secondary school transition

Transitional difficulties have been recognised in many stages of education. Nicholls and Gardner (1999) focus on the transition from primary school (Key stage 2) to secondary school (Key stage 3) identifying the importance of continuity and progression in teaching and learning. They consider the need for primary and secondary schools to work closely together to recognise and ease the tension and stress which pupils experience during the transition period. Further support was provided by Galton et al. (2000) identifying transitional difficulties in relation to social adjustment, lack of curriculum continuity, variation in teaching approaches and consequent failure of pupils to take account of these differences in their efforts at learning to become ‘professional pupils’.

Evangelou et al. (2005 p.8) suggest successful transition for children moving from primary school to secondary school include:

- Development of new friendships and improving self-esteem and confidence
- Settling well into school life so as to cause no concern for teachers or parents
- Showing increasing interest in school and school work
- Getting used to routines and school organisation and working with greater ease
- Experiencing curriculum continuity

However, they also found that transition could cause difficulties in social adjustment including (p.16):

- Transition being stressful, the need for adequate information and social support
- The need for activities that help pupils to form friendship networks are essential for coping
- Identifying ways of increased self-esteem that can aid academic motivation.

Evangelou et al. (2005 p.8) also found that low socio-economic status was associated with a less positive transition for children resulting in underperformance and underachievement.

These findings may be of importance in the current research in terms of transition in subsequent educational stages. The findings also resonate with earlier research by Beck (1992) and Bloomer (1999) identifying that uncertainty, individuation and risk in the learning career of young people were more evident for those of low socio-economic status and low cultural capital. Mendick (2008) also advocates a clear correlation with socio-economic class and later A Level achievement and outcome.

West et al. (2010) provide further supporting evidence from longitudinal research involving over 2000 Scottish pupils from primary school (age 11) with follow up in secondary school (age 13 and 15) and again on leaving school (age 18-19). They focused on the experiences of transition, predictors of poorer transition and consequences for educational attainment and pupil well-being. In an analysis of

their results West et al. (2010) found that after a year in secondary school the majority of students recalled having difficulty adjusting to both peer and social systems at the beginning of secondary school. They found lower levels of self-esteem, increased depression and anti-social behaviour. At age 15 poorer school transition predicted higher levels of depression and lower attainment and lower self-esteem. At age 18-19 beyond school they found earlier transitional difficulties were associated with low self-esteem, increased psychological distress, and poorer performance in academic qualifications. However, in a critique of their research although there are many benefits of longitudinal research, retrospective data was gathered which was reliant on the accuracy of memory recall of participants. Not all participants identified transitional difficulties, with about a quarter of the sample suggesting they did not experience any difficulties.

However, not all research into primary-secondary transition produces consistent results. For example, Graham and Hill (2003) found after a month in secondary school two thirds of the participants reported no anxieties. In contrast Zeedyk et al. (2003 p.67) found greater worries in peer relationships including bullying than originally anticipated by primary school children on their transition to secondary school. They suggest that the transition from primary to secondary school in the UK has been depicted as 'one of the most difficult in pupils' educational careers'. Zeedyk et al. (2003) found the move from the smaller more personal environments of primary school to the larger, impersonal world of secondary school required considerable levels of adjustment including the new educational demands, exposure to more and older pupils, associated peer groups and pressures and challenges to identify. Poorer transition leads to lower educational achievement and has a negative input on pupil well-being.

Whilst there is a considerable amount of literature identifying transitional difficulties for pupils moving from primary to secondary school, this raises questions as to why so little appears to be done to help reduce these difficulties before pupil's progress through further educational stages. It is the limited research and apparent continuation of transitional difficulties within post-16 transition that is the main focus for this current research.

Secondary to Post-16 transition

As previously mentioned, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified research within sixth form colleges as an under-researched sector of educational provision, identifying significant gaps in literature, few studies on post-compulsory education and dislocation between research studies of institutional culture and practices and new academic interests in learning. This view supports the rationale for this current research which specifically focuses on the transition from GCSE to A Level studies.

The transition between secondary school and sixth form (GCSEs to A Levels) is recognised as a time of significant difficulty for some individuals. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2002) suggests that ‘those who are more able or less disadvantaged have a slower and more supported transition’. Emphasising that not all young people have difficulties in transition, but those that are less able may experience more issues.

Furlong et al. (2006) comment that over the last few decades there has been a suggestion that youth transitions have become increasingly complex. This has led to greater vulnerability to marginalisation and exclusion. The traditional linear route between school and the workplace has been replaced by unpredictability, frequent breaks in employment and backtracking, resulting in ‘blending’ of statuses. However, this alleged change in the nature of transition is rarely challenged. Furthermore, Furlong et al. (2006) argue that whilst unchallenged, there remains no systematic analysis of the extent to which transitional difficulties have increased in complexity.

Furlong et al. (2006) analysed data from longitudinal research from 1987 – 2005 for 1009 pupils aged 15 from the Glasgow area of West Scotland provided by the Medical Research Council’s Social and Public Health Sciences Unit. Participants and their parents were interviewed, completed postal surveys and took part in follow-up interviews when aged 15, 18, 21 and 23. 65% of the original sample continued to the final interviews at age 23. Furlong et al. (2006) found that some participants have experienced more fragmented transitions than others, and that successful linear transitions were more common in participants with higher level of education, for example, degrees or equivalent. Poorer transitional experiences

were found in participants with no qualifications. In addition to educational performance, other factors appear to have had an impact on transition, including living in deprived areas and parental occupation. Furlong et al. (2006) conclude that it may be premature to argue that youth transitions have increased in complexity over the last few decades. To argue for increased complexities, it would be necessary to reanalyse some of the major surveys conducted in the 1960s and 1970s.

In a critique of Furlong et al. (2006) reanalysing data from more than 50 years ago, might help explain what has changed over time, but may be less helpful in explaining current transitional difficulties. However, the research might show a continuing trend in transitional difficulties within key educational stages. The findings highlight less advantageous pathways and transition from school to the workplace rather than within education provision, many of which might still exist today. The alleged process of transition complexity also acts to mask structures and disadvantages rather than differences between educational stages.

Nonetheless, Furlong et al. (2006) highlight the long-term problems relating to transitional difficulties not only within education provision but how these can impact on individuals in later life courses.

Dixon et al. (2006) conducted interviews with 101 young people aged 16 – 17 and found that young people who experience poor transition ‘are more likely to end up long term unemployed, to live on a low income, to become teenage parents and to suffer poor mental and physical health’. These views were supported by Coleman (2007) suggesting that where young people are both ‘young’ and ‘adult’ at the same time arguably need the most support and time in transition. Coleman (2007) identifies transitional concerns in relation to:

- A feeling of anticipation for what is ahead
- A sense of regret for the stage that has been lost
- Anxiety about the future
- A major psychological readjustment
- A degree of ambiguity of status during transition.

Gulliver et al. (2010) provide support for Dixon et al. (2006) and Coleman (2007) in addition they emphasise the benefits of addressing mental health needs of children and young people stating that ‘tackling mental health problems early in life will improve educational attainment, employment opportunities and physical health’. It is acknowledged that there is great importance attached to identifying and addressing the mental health needs of young people, this is an area for further development that is beyond scope of my current research.

Subject specific research into post-16 transition

Research into post-16 transition has tended to be on a subject specific basis rather than targeting the specific needs of learners in post-16 education. Winter (2001) emphasises the transitional difficulties for learners moving from GCSE to A Level Mathematics, identifying problems associated with teaching and learning styles, larger class sizes, greater spread of ability levels and problems of resources.

In an evaluation of participation in mathematics, Matthews and Pepper (2007) working with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) found that where a change in the specification meant that transition from GCSE to AS Level Mathematics was easier than in the past; however, transition from AS to A2 level was more difficult with lower grade students being more likely to struggle. Matthews and Pepper (2007) also found that some students transferring between centres were inadequately prepared and that understanding of the process of mathematics was often non-existent. The report also criticised and identified faults with the system which suggests students were unable to think for themselves as previous teaching and learning had focused on obtaining the best results for GCSE examinations rather than teaching understanding of the concepts and processes of Mathematics.

Mendick (2008) also investigated problems in transition from GCSE to A Level mathematics. 2 case studies were drawn from an original sample population of 43 AS level mathematics students, interviews were conducted and some lessons were observed. The two case studies were used to explore the problematic

transition between GCSE and A Level mathematics where there was evidence of high failure rates at AS Level, an increase in drop-out between AS and A2 Level, a year-on-year drop in the number of students taking mathematics, which then reflected in the decrease in numbers of learners taking mathematics at university.

From the research Mendick (2008) identified three roles of transition within mathematics – to mark out points of crisis; to mark out places where the excluding effects of fixing differences with mathematics education are clearly visible; and marking out spaces where learners' relationships with mathematics change. Both participants from the case studies, although initially enjoying and engaging in mathematics went on to drop the subject. For one participant, Mendick (2008) suggested the outcome was the result of loss of space for working on autonomy which led to the learner leaving the course. For the other participant, the practices within mathematics learning including the need to work quickly, public reading out of test marks, active encouragement within and between group competition and constant talk of some learners in the group being more 'naturally able' than others, with some also being 'badly prepared' may go some way to explain the distress that helped explain why the learners become lost in transition from one mathematical environment to another.

In a critique of Mendick (2008) the limited case study evidence provides explanation of why some learners drop-out of A Level mathematics, but fails to explain the more positive discourse of other learners that remain in learning at A Level and go on to achieve success.

More recent research by Rushton and Wilson (2014) identify that the GCSE qualification in mathematics marks a transition, the result from which may be used for entry to further study or employment. They also acknowledge that there has been an identifiable high drop-out rate in the transition from GCSE to A Level mathematics, thus providing support for the earlier findings of Mendick (2008). The authors comment that whilst the gap between GCSE and A Level is widely recognised there is little research evidence into the nature of the gap in key stages rather than the actual reasons for dropping-out.

As part of a review and syllabus redevelopment of mathematics, Rushton and Wilson (2004) developed 2 questionnaires, 1 for schools/colleges and the other for

employers. Following an initial piloting of 15 questionnaires, a final draft of the questionnaire was created to be used in web-based format. Although 2085 schools/colleges using the OCR mathematics qualification were emailed, a low response rate of 8.6% was received. From the questionnaires sent out to 143 employers a response rate of 24.5% was received. Although the findings were not conclusive they did give some insight into problems identified by the teachers and employers in relation to mathematics learning. In a critique of the research, different questionnaires were used for the teachers and employer and as such it might be difficult to draw conclusions from the data depending on the differences in the questions used. The overall response rate was low and as such it would be difficult to generalise the findings to the wider population due to possible lack of representativeness of the respondents and the perceived power of the survey used. Nonetheless, the authors state that ‘a new ‘Core Mathematics’ qualification had been developed which aims to provide a sound basis for the mathematical demands that students will face at university and within employment across a broad range of academic, professional and technical fields’.

Lawton et al. (2004) worked with forums and committees set up to identify gaps in respective syllabus and to consider transitional difficulties between GCSE and A Level Modern Foreign Languages. Their findings identify lack of independent learning, lack of skills, poor time-management, self-discipline, organisation, difficulty in taking the initiative, problem solving and researching as barriers to learning.

Also, focusing on the transition from secondary school to higher education study of Modern Foreign Languages Gallagher-Brett and Canning (2011) used case study evidence based on questionnaires and focus groups with 26 first year university students at English universities and 19 students studying at A Level in a nearby school. Participants in the study reported the challenging nature of the transition from GCSE to A Level. The authors found that the transition from GCSE to A Level is problematic and is concerned not only with language acquisition but also with the ability to think and express ideas at a higher level. Difficulties in transition are likely to occur where there is a lack of interest and lack of motivation to have a critical approach to the world.

The Department for Education (2012) aimed to provide statistical analysis of progression roles in English Baccalaureate subjects (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, English Language, History, Geography, French, German and Spanish). They used data from the National Pupil Database for the cohort that completed GCSE examinations in 2008 and subsequently in 2009 and 2010 on completion of AS and A Level examinations. They found that progression to AS Level depended on the grades achieved at GCSE where lower progression was made for those participants attaining lower GCSE grades. They also found that achievement at A Level decreased as GCSE grades decreased, this being similar across all subjects, with only a small proportion of students achieving better grades at A Level compared to their earlier GCSE's.

In their findings, the Department for Education (2012) emphasise problems in physics and mathematics, for example, 50% of pupils that gained an A grade in physics at GCSE level went on to achieve a grade C or lower at A Level. Similarly, in mathematics only 26% of pupils achieving an A* or A grade at GCSE went on to achieve a similar grade at A Level. It was also found that 50% of pupils with Grade B in GCSE mathematics went on to achieve a D grade or lower at A Level. These findings highlight concerns regarding underachievement of learners' especially in attainment between GCSE level and subsequent A Level results and are significant to this current research investigating transitional difficulties in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

In contrast, Williams et al. (2008) consider methods of progressing forward through transition focusing on positive progression and outcome. They argue that definitions and models of transition often consider negative implications. Williams et al. (2008) suggest that transition is widely seen as a growth point rather than a problem. They suggest transition is seen as a challenge, that it is achievable through autonomy and self-reflection. Emphasising positive aspects, they suggest growth can be achieved, not just in the social sense, but also in relation to approaches to study and work.

Williams et al. (2008) focus on transition and transitional practices from the subjective view of participants. They use case study methods with 47 participants from five different colleges in the UK. Participants selected were considered to be

‘at risk’ in terms of their predicted GCSE grades (C or lower) or were from socio-economic backgrounds where participation at Higher Education was typically low. Participants were interviewed at the start of their college course, at the end of their AS year and finally at the end of the A2 year. All participants were undertaking mathematics at A Level as part of their course, however, from the original sample some went on to drop the subject, drop out of college and others had to repeat a year.

From their findings Williams et al. (2008 p.1) suggest that many of the participants ‘recalled transition as a key moment, when trouble with the step-up in demand was experienced at the same time as social, intellectual and emotional challenges’. Participants narrative comment on the need to re-construct peer groups, to become more autonomous learners, to adjust to the increased workload and to develop identity-in-practice i.e. moving from the person I was to the person I have become.

Although Williams et al. (2008) identify a weakness in their research in that data came from students after the transition from school to college, they suggest that many of the participants could identify with some of the earlier transitional difficulties and view them in terms of positive aspects but only after the event and as such Williams et al. (2008) argue that transition can be seen in a more positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement. This view was later supported by Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011). Their research focused on interviews with two different groups, one group consisted of 25 learners conducted the in the summer holiday before commencing an A Level course at college. The other group consisted of 47 students after completion of their first year (AS Level) in college claiming that student’s interviews show a more positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement where transition was not seen as an obstacle but as an opportunity to develop a new identity within the transition from school to college mathematics.

I would suggest there is a need to go further, beyond subject specific difficulties, to take into consideration student views and opinions regarding the positive and negative aspects of transition across all areas of learning in post-16 education.

Having identified transitional difficulties in many key educational stages including moving from GCSE to A Level learning there are still further implications considering the transition from post-16 to further education and on moving into to higher education. Many of the research findings into transitional difficulties identified in earlier key stages of education resonate with the challenges for degree level education.

Post-16 to University transition

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2001) '*Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge*' aimed to raise young people's aspirations towards higher education through funded activities implemented in partnership with schools, Colleges of Further Education and Higher Education institutions. The challenge was associated to:

- A greater likelihood of a successful transition at 16
- Positive attitudes to higher education
- A greater likelihood of stating an intention to go to university.

Schools and colleges identified young people as members of the widening participation cohort, namely young people who had the ability to progress to higher education but came from disadvantaged backgrounds without any family history of higher education. 19,998 young people in Year 11 and 17,116 young people in Year 9 were identified for the cohort with follow up surveys with 2280 young people completing Year 11 in 2000/2001 and follow up surveys completed with 1854 young people in Year 11 in 2001/2002. Data was collected over two academic years.

In evaluating DfES (2001) '*Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge*', Morris and Rutt (2005) found that for some young people, policy-related awareness-raising and aspiration-raising activities were insufficient to overcome barriers. Lack of aspiration to go to university was linked to lack of motivation on their post-16 courses and concerns about incurring debt. However, the research can be criticised in that a non-representative sample of post-16 learners was used. Participants were from what was described as Excellence in Cities and Education

Action Zones targeting the most deprived urban areas in England thus excluding large parts of the population living in rural locations. Questionnaires were also used as a method of gathering data; these were dependant on the honesty of the respondents. Further evaluation of the impact of DfES (2001) '*Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge*' provided by Morris et al. (2009) suggest there appear to be a possible association between the achievement and progress of young people to higher education, however, findings suggested that 24.1% of young people in the *Aimhigher* cohort compared to 30% of young people from schools not in the *Aimhigher* project went on to continue in higher education.

Earlier research by Cook and Leckey (1999) consider a range of issues surrounding transition from A Level to degree level studies. They suggest the widespread belief that in order to ease student transition it is essential that university staff have an informed view of the diversity in the backgrounds, needs and aspirations of students they teach. They also suggest that the negative impact of transition, academic performance and retention reduce the likelihood that students effectively adapt to the demands of higher education. These views were supported by Drew (2001) suggesting that there is an obligation placed on teachers and lecturers to consider the specific transitional needs of students progressing to higher education. If students are to be effectively prepared they need to be introduced to the demands of university study. This should include introduction to typical approaches to learning, learning how to manage large quantities of independent learning, and developing skills to function within the new environment. Drew (2001) also emphasises that the lack of personal individual contact in the experience of many first-year university students may well be a significant contributing factor to transitional difficulties. This highlights the importance of addressing transitional difficulties in all key educational stages, including the need to make potential university learners more aware of the requirements and expectations of learning at degree level. There is also a need to ensure current A Level syllabus content meet the skills required to progress into higher education.

Other research into transition from A Level to university focuses on transition in individual subjects, for example, Mathematics, English, and Business. In mathematics, Hoyles et al. (2001) consider issues of transition from A Level to

university mathematics and how the transition might be influenced by the changing profile in post-16 education. They suggest the gap between A Levels and university courses is not a new problem. In earlier research Thwaites (1961) argues that students do not understand the mathematical ideas which university teachers consider basic to their subject; they are not skilful in the manipulation process of even elementary mathematics; they cannot grasp new ideas quickly and cannot write simple English clearly and grammatically. This view is supported by Bibby (1995) suggesting that few students have developed a critical understanding of mathematics.

The London Mathematics Society (1995) criticised undergraduates as having severe lack of essential technical facility, lack of fluency and reliability in numerical and algebraic manipulation and simplification. They also identify a marked decline in student's analytical powers, where most students no longer understand the precise discipline of mathematics in which exact, reliable calculation, logic and proof are essential. The London Mathematics Society further argue that many high-attaining students were seriously lacking in fundamental notions of the subject, suggesting this was a significant indicator that something had gone wrong. Although the research findings (Thwaites, 1961; Bibby 1995; The London Mathematics Society, 1995; and Hoyles et al. 2001) discuss transition from A Level to degree level they nonetheless resonate with Winter (2001) and Qualification and Curriculum Authority (2006) proposing that more needs to be done to address transitional issues at earlier key stages in education.

In English, Eggleston (2000) reviews the concept of English studies embodied in A Level English where nothing appears to have changed since the introduction of A Levels in 1951 and has failed to keep pace with the way English is evolving in higher education. Bluett (2004) suggests the most serious consequent of A Level English Literature is that it does not position itself explicitly in relation to the aesthetic, cultural and linguistic requirements of degree level studies.

Green (2005) also argues that universities offer places solely based on A Level examination performance, this failing to address transitional issues. There is a lack of developing pedagogical practices to meet the changing needs of the

student body. Lecturers are failing to respond in their teaching to perceptible student needs and this is likely to exacerbate students' difficulties in transition and to impact on retention. Green (2005) also emphasises the establishment of relationships between teachers and learners and the substantial change in these relationships at university. These relationships are also likely to affect transition to the new learning environment and in developing independent study skills.

Green (2005) used survey data from 128 sixth form students, 18 teachers and 113 first year undergraduate students and lecturers. Findings identify a range of issues including: communication skills; essay writing skills; analytical skills; note-taking and note-making abilities; research skills; intellectual curiosity; creativity; wider subject knowledge and wider reading, that have a negative impact on learning and associated retention in English at university. This university-based research underpins the difficulties associated with transitional difficulties between school and university which appear to be suggesting that more needs to be done to address these issues at an earlier stage in learners' educational careers.

Barlow (2012) identifies growing concerns regarding the adequacy of students in preparation from pre-university to degree level literacy studies. The number of applicants to read English Studies at university has increased dramatically since 2006. However, there are increasing concerns of student lack of ability to cope with the demands of university. Barlow (2012) highlights anxiety relating to the growing emphasis on teaching context at the expense of close reading technique. Lecturers have identified students having generally poor abilities and are unwilling to contribute to discussion of textual detail. Not all lack of ability is placed with the student, concern is also raised at the number of non-specialist teachers teaching A Level English who themselves do not have the traditional skills that are associated with close reading and literary criticism.

In Business, Crabtree et al. (2007) focus on the high levels of student withdrawal, particularly during the first-year undergraduate programme. Students fail to engage effectively with the process of learning, appear to be unaware that independent learning is required for success in higher education, and lack of many of the skills necessary for effective independent study. This criticism was supported by Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2001) in their report on

the first year of implementation of Curriculum 2000. The report comments that student study for revised A Level qualifications had fewer opportunities for independent work than before, a heavy workload was also considered a contributing factor.

Crabtree et al. (2007) point out that there is less supervision of learning and that the staff-student relationship is more impersonal. As a result students may feel more uncertain and insecure, there may be erosion in confidence, reduced motivation and possible increase in decision to withdraw from courses. In a criticism of A Level learning, Crabtree et al. (2007) identify that students appear to have little opportunity or incentive to obtain further information from the literature, or to read more widely around the subject and were not usually required to write extended essays or reports. These are also reflected by Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2006) and Gallagher-Brett and Canning (2011) report problems associated with language acquisition and with the ability to think and express ideas at a higher level.

From the literature reviewed in relation to transitional difficulties at key educational stages this highlights an ongoing area for further research. There appears to be a need for more to be done not only in identifying what causes the transitional difficulties in each key educational stage, but more importantly what can be done to resolve or reduce at least some of these issues making the transition for learners of any age less problematic. Resolving these issues goes beyond the scope of this current research but provides an area for further research and development.

Models of transition

Models of transition have been created to explain transition as a shift from one position to another, usually through a sequence of related stages. Schlossberg (1984) and Schlossberg and Robinson (1996) propose models of transition which consider the role of adolescents as encountering a life of on-going transition in their personal, social, educational and career futures. Schlossberg (1989) provides an explanation for analysing human adaptation to transition which identifies four major factors influencing the ability to cope with transition: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies. Her model was later revised by Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) suggesting that the main concepts of transition can be considered in terms of three phases: moving on, moving through, and moving out. The four main factors and three phases of transition are used to evaluate how well individuals are able to cope with transition. They suggest that different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and that the same person reacts differently at different times. It is the way transition is perceived that appears to be most important.

In a critique of Schlossberg's theoretical perspective, Evans et al. (1998) argue that Schlossberg's model is more of an assessment tool rather than an actual theory and that her model is based on meta-analysis of many different research findings, including incorporation of Cormier and Hackney's (1993) counselling model which is based on the following stages:

- Relationship building – using basic listening skills and developing a rapport
- Areas to assess – current repertoire of coping
- Sample client goals – developing an action plan
- Possible counsellor interventions – problem solving strategies
- Termination follow-up – review what has been done and plan next steps.

Evans et al. (1998 p.122) argue that:

Schlossberg et al. (1995) have taken a vast array of writing and gleaned the most important concepts from them, added their insights

and created a dynamic model that can provide a solid foundation form practice that is responsive to both commonalities and idiosyncrasies.

In further writing, Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) discuss the transition model in relation to education explaining that college students experience three types of transition: anticipated; unanticipated; and non-events (where non-events are described as transitions that were anticipated but did not occur). However, it may be difficult to relate Chickering and Schlossberg's model directly to the current research in relation to transition from GCSE to A Level studies where students are perhaps in the process of 'moving on' from one educational stage to another, rather than 'moving through' or 'moving out', although there may be some resonance with anticipated, unanticipated and non-events described by the learners' themselves in their transition between key educational stages.

Bridges (1991) developed a transition model that focuses on transition rather than change. Change is situational and occurs without the person transitioning, it usually occurs quickly even though the individual may not be in agreement with the change. In contrast transition is an internal, psychological process over a period of time. Bridges (1991) suggests transition is a three-phase process where the individual gradually accepts the details of the new situation and the changes that come with it. The three phases are:

- Ending, Losing and Letting go – often associated with resistance and emotional distress, fear, denial, anger, sadness, disorientation, frustration, uncertainty, sense of loss – requiring acceptance of subjective losses.
- The Neutral Zone – confusion uncertainty, impatience.
- The New Beginning – focusing on the 4P's – purpose, picture, plan, part – by accepting and embracing change and developing new skills to enable the individual to move forward.

In a critique of Bridges' (1991) transition model, it may be more applicable for implementing change rather than identifying and resolving transitional difficulties in educational stages.

Fisher (2012) created a Personal Transition Curve which includes stages of anxiety, happiness, fear, threat, guilt, depression, gradual acceptance, moving forward, disillusionment, hostility, denial, anger and complacency. Fisher (2012) argues that any change or transition, no matter how small, has the potential to impact on an individual and may generate conflict between existing values and beliefs and anticipated altered ones. However, he suggests that anecdotal evidence and participant observations would imply that the theoretical model itself was fairly robust. He partially based his model on earlier work by Kubler-Ross (1969) yet considered his own model would be as widely accepted. Kubler-Ross (1969) focused on transition following bereavement; it would be difficult to see how this model of transition could be directly related to educational transition. Fisher (2012) acknowledges the difficulty in taking an introspective approach to his transition model which may have more negative impact on the individual, suggesting that the stages of transition only become clearer on later reflection.

There are some similarities between the stages of Fisher's (2012) transition curve and the earlier transition model proposed by Bridges (1991). Reflection can be beneficial in understanding emotional/psychological factors experienced by individuals but these are retrospective and may not help reduce the transitional difficulties faced at the time of the transition period when learners move from GCSE to A Level studies.

Beach (2003) provides a consequential transition model that defines transition in terms of developmental change in the relationship between an individual and one or more social activities. Shifts in the individual's sense of self or social position are seen in terms of moving from personal experiences of becoming someone or something new. Beach (2003) suggests that consequential transition not only change individuals as a result of the transition process but the activities in which they engage also change.

In various writings (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1995; Bloomer, 1999, 2000, 2001; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000) the authors draw on their findings from a 4-year longitudinal study of 79 pupils age 15-16 from secondary schools in England that stated an intention to proceed to study in Further Education. They suggest that

changes in young peoples' educational careers and attitudes to learning were frequently linked to their lives outside formal educational institutions, including friendship groups, student-parent relationships, personal relationships and economic status had negative influences on their educational success.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1995) argue that theory must acknowledge the situated, positional, relational and participatory nature of learning, if it is to explain the complexities of learning and transformational processes. Using the concept of 'learning career' they explain knowledge, learning and activity need to be understood in relation to position and its embedded meaning. Learning is defined as a socially and culturally situated activity occurring through interaction in which culturally located ideas and belief systems are exchanged and developed. Context is constructed in the course of social interaction as part of the meaning-making process which informs action. In developing the concept of 'learning career' Bloomer and Hodkinson (1995) identify both continuity and change, using the term transformation as an alternative to transition. They suggest transformations are not predetermined, although they are developed by the individuals' *habitus* and the material and cultural context in which the *habitus* has developed and the individual is located. This was also linked to social, economic and cultural capital in the formation of learning careers.

Expanding on the concept of learning career as a social strand which consists of periods of stability, change and transformation in dispositions to learning throughout the life course, relating to continuities and changes in meaning, perceptions, values, identity and culture, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1996) developed the 'career decision-making model' in which they suggest that transitions or transformations in learning careers are often gradual, perceptible and predictable only within broad limits. Young peoples' dispositions to learning frequently transform in ways that are subtle, irregular, unpredictable and multi-dimensional rather than unidimensional. Transitions or transformations in learning careers cannot, therefore, be represented by causal models, whether sociological or psychological but are dependent on the situatedness of knowledge and learning, the position of the learner, the rationality of learning and identity and the participatory nature of learning.

In a critique of career decision-making literature, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that much writing on career decision-making is flawed. It focuses on trait theory, developmental approaches and social learning theory where social experiences are seen as external influences on decisions, yet their own writing highlights that the social experiences of the individuals are an integral part of the decision-making process. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that it is not possible to theorise young people's experiences of learning on the basis of their own individual knowledge-making, participation and activities, but theory must take into consideration the structures that frame opportunities for learning and how these structures are experienced by the individual.

Although research including Bridges (1991), Bloomer and Hodkinson (1995) and Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) illuminate theories of learning and transformation (transition) there is still greater emphasis on career-decision making than directly in relation to the transition to post-16 education, for example, when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. It may be that for some young people decisions made at 15-16 years of age only focus on their choices for A Levels, GNVQ's and other qualifications without necessarily focusing on their future career pathways.

Models of change

As an alternative to theories of transition, we can consider models of change. Earlier work by Lewin (1947) describes a Change Management Model based on three stages: unfreeze, change, and refreeze. In the first of these stages, unfreeze suggests getting ready to change, reaching a point of understanding that change is necessary and moving away from the current comfort zone. The second stage, change or transition is seen not as an event but a process, where transition is the inner movement or journey in a reaction to change. As we become 'unfrozen' we move towards a new way of being. The third stage, 'refreeze' establishes stability after change, when change becomes accepted and becomes the new norm. Lewin (1947) also suggested the third stage 'refreeze' prevented individuals or groups from regressing to earlier behaviours prior to change.

Kanter et al. (1992) were perhaps unjustly critical of Lewin's Change Management Model suggesting it was simplistic, quaint, linear and static in conception. However, Lewin's model has stood up to criticism over many decades. Lewin (1947) aimed to find an effective approach to resolving social conflict through change in individual and group behaviour, basing his model on theory, experimentation and practice.

Borger and Amundson (1987) propose that transition is an evolutionary continuum where individuals move into transition, a period of confusion in the middle and then progress out of or beyond the transition process. They argue that the middle period within transition is the time for readjustment of perception of personal identity, shifts in emotion and career aspiration.

Borger and Amundson's (1987) evolutionary continuum is reflected in the Four Rooms of Change Model (Janssen, 1996). In a personal crisis, there is a move from contentment, via a denial phase, then perceiving your own lack of contentment, before moving into confusion and then into renewal. Moving into a crisis is considered as a turning point, in which the individual can identify the problem situation, then considering the available possibilities, identify what you will do to discover the variety of situational difficulties and possibilities (Janssen, 1996). Yet these models of transition can be criticised in that they are actually models of resistance to change rather than models of change. They suggest the individual passes through each phase to a desired outcome. It can be argued that in doing so, they are reducing or ignoring individual differences whether in relation to compulsory/post-compulsory education, or education to work based transitions. The complexity of human life and social interaction would suggest that any one definition or model of transition would be limited in scope and application (Borger and Amundson, 1987).

Pintrich et al. (1993) comment on traditional Individual Conceptual Change Models describing learning as the interaction that takes place between and individual's experiences, their understanding and interpreting information gathered through experience and current conceptual ideas.

Conceptual change models focus on conceptual change that is important for describing how students' prior knowledge may facilitate or impede learning. The

models identify three traditional behaviours indicative for motivation in learning – choice of task, level of engagement or activity in the task, and a willingness to persist in the task. Individuals have to make choices about whether they have a problem or not, then make choices about what constitutes the problem and finally deciding how they will solve the problem in that context. The model focuses on an individual's choices, motivational constructs and goals.

In addition to the three motivational indicators, there are four conditions for individual conceptual change:

1. Dissatisfaction – with current conceptions, suggesting the less dissatisfied with current conceptions, the less likely change will be viewed as radical.
2. New concepts must be intelligible – the student must be able to consider the new concept as a better means of explaining experiences or must be able to have greater understanding.
3. The new concept must be plausible – whilst the student might be able to understand the new concept, it might be more difficult to see how it can be applied or may be considered to be inconsistent with other understandings.
4. The new concept must appear fruitful – in that it must have explanatory power or suggest a new area for investigation.

The conceptual change model suggests how learners might change their belief about academic subject matter using a rational process of cognitive change.

However, in a critique of conceptual change models, Pintrich et al. (1993) suggest that the main problems are lack of theoretical reasoning of the way individual motivational beliefs about the self as learner influences learning in the classroom, and the role of the individual in the learning community. This can in part be attributed to the lack of control learners have over the curriculum content and teaching styles. Pintrich et al. (1993) also argue that the four conditions necessarily for conceptual change are not linear, and are in fact dependent on a wider variety of cognitive functions, including deeper processing of cognitive strategies such as elaboration and organisational strategies to facilitate encoding and learning. In a further critique Pintrich et al. (1993) argue that cognitive-only models of student learning do not adequately explain why students that appear to

have requisite prior conceptual knowledge do not use this knowledge in many school tasks.

Rogers (2003) put forward a simplified model, identifying phases of social change in terms of denial, awareness, getting the facts, thinking about making decision, understanding social implications, adopting the new behaviour, and practicing long term commitment. Rogers emphasises that transition requiring recognition of social change was based on identifying long term solutions with greater depth of understanding. However, in a critique of Rogers (2003) the model suggests that successful transition is based on the ability to gain insight as part of later reflection. In addition, the phases on social change may be of more relevance in the workplace than directly in relation to transition between GCSE and A Level learning and may be less relevant where there is a need to gain insight as part of an ongoing and more current process of adaptiveness.

Chapter summary

The literature review has been an enlightening process enabling the development of the conceptual framework for my own research. It has established the context of the research within the education provision for learners moving from GCSE to A Level studies. The literature review provided definitions of transition in an educational context (Miles et al. 2002; Beach, 2003). It has considered both positive views of transition (Beach, 2003; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011) and negative views (Osgood et al. 2002; Williams et al. 2008).

Reflecting on sociological explanations of transition (Bourdieu, 1986; Giddens, 1999; Bloomer, 1999; Williams et al. 2000) identifying the way in which *habitus* is created through social interactions and practices that are transferable (for example between GCSE and A Level studies) and which guide behaviour, developing a sense of identity and belonging through interaction with others.

The literature review also focuses on transition as barriers to learning at key educational stages (Lawton et al. 2004; Furlong et al. 2006; Gorard and Smith, 2007; Coleman, 2007) and identified limitations and gaps in the research on

transitional difficulties when learners move from GCSE to A Level studies (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000; Creswell, 2003; Gorard and Smith, 2007).

In reviewing the literature on models of transition (Schlossberg, 1989; Bridges, 1991; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1996) and models of change (Lewin, 1947; Pintrich et al. 1993; Rogers, 2003) the focus of the models appear more relative to theories of learning and transformation, career-decision making, perception of personal identity, and transition to the workplace, there appears a distinct lack of any model specifically related to the transition in post-16 education.

The literature review has enabled me to reflect on different theories, models and approaches and to identify gaps in the literature which have helped develop the rationale for my own research questions. It has enabled me to acknowledge different academic contributions that view transition from both positive and negative perspectives and to identify under-researched areas within the context of post-16 educational research. Sociological explanations of transition have highlighted internal and external factors that contribute to transitional difficulties together with research into transition as barriers to learning at key educational stages. Finally, the literature review provides the rationale which forms the basis of the conceptual framework for my own research to investigate how learners' experiences are shaped within social and educational contexts to consider their views on transition when moving from GCSE to A Level education and enhances the development of my own three research questions:

- What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level Studies?
- What internal factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education?
- What external factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education?

On completion of my research I hope to enhance knowledge, albeit in a very small way, and to help increase an understanding of transitional difficulties faced by young people when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter provides a review of current literature and research findings and identifies gaps in the literature that form the conceptual framework for my current thesis. It establishes a rationale for my own research to investigate how learners' experiences are shaped within social and educational contexts and enables the development of my main research questions.

This chapter focuses on the research methodology explaining the overarching theoretical and philosophical framework which guide the research and the theoretical or conceptual framework in which the approaches and methods are situated. The chapter discusses positivist and interpretivist approaches; concepts of epistemology and ontology; and quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. The research methodology also provides a link between the theory and practice of research, formulating the research questions, determining the research approach, data collection and analysis and developing my own thesis as a small-scale exploratory case study. This chapter is constructed in four main parts.

- Methodology
- Research design
- Methods of data analysis
- Ethical issues

Methodology

Research methodology refers to the general process of research, providing a thread that runs from the initial project proposal through all aspects of the research to the final outcome and conclusions drawn from the research findings. The methodology comprises of the theoretical or conceptual framework in which the approaches and methods are situated. They provide the rationale and justification for the methods selected and the ways in which they are used (Stierer

and Antoniou, 2004). Methodology does not relate specifically to the product of the scientific inquiry but to the actual process (Cohen et al. 2004).

Ontology and Epistemology

Methodology also takes into consideration the concepts of ontology and epistemology in relation to the construction and conception of social reality. Ontology can be described as the study of being and everything involved with being, for example, human relationships and the ontological world they create. Ontology considers a way of understanding the world, what is real about the world, how we define our subject matter and what we take reality to be. Epistemology is the philosophical theory of knowledge. It poses questions such as: What kind of knowledge will my own research be based on? How does knowledge influence my research and how will it develop during the research process?

Cohen et al. (2004) suggest that knowledge can be hard, real and capable of being transmitted in tangible form or it can be considered soft, subjective and based on experience and insight within a unique and personal nature. Gadamer (2004) suggests that knowledge, what we can understand and how we can understand is influenced by what lays within our horizons. Gadamer also comments that effective history takes the form of a contingent tradition developed through action and events taking place in the present and reflecting on what truth is in the human sciences requires self-transparency to gain better understanding and interpretation of knowledge.

Epistemological assumptions are influenced by ontological assumptions and methodological assumptions. Ontological assumptions consider the nature of reality whilst methodological assumptions consider the research design, methods of data collection and data analysis. The two main epistemological paradigms are positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism is based on the natural sciences focusing on testing theories and hypotheses, seeking absolute truth through quantifiable research findings (Baert, 1998). Early research was based on behaviourist approaches (Watson, 1913) which emphasised that only observable, overt behaviour should be the focus of

research enquiry. The positivist approach expanded the behaviourist views arguing that there is a real world that is observable and there are facts that are identifiable and capable of description and measurement. Positivists claim that scientific theory emerges from observation and facts which are superior to common sense understanding (Cohen, 1980).

Positivist research aims to develop understanding of both natural and social worlds through quantitative methods and measurements. The positivist approach also emphasises the fundamental assumptions of realism, arguing that there is a single concrete reality in which truth can be discovered through objective and unbiased investigative methods (Bhaskar, 1978).

Borg and Gall (1989) describe positivism as a system of philosophy that excludes everything from its consideration except natural phenomena and their inter-relationships. The concept of 'logical positivism' aimed to tighten scientific knowledge claims and reduce speculative, unprovable elements from the domain of scientific research.

However, the positivist approach has been criticised for being too restrictive. Howe (1985) and Scott (2001) criticise the positivist approach, questioning whether value-free observations actually exist.

Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (1998) argue that whilst 'established' educational research focuses on positive quantitative methods, these were criticised as having limited focus in relation to the input and output of academic achievement in schools. Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (1998) suggest educational research has seen a shift toward the investigation of the actual social processes of schooling, pupil cognitive processes and school culture, taking into consideration the way students learn on an individual basis rather than as a whole.

In contrast the interpretivist approach is based on interpretation and creation of meaning, through reflexivity and shared understanding. Meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interacting with their world (Creswell, 1989). Within interpretivism the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, where studies are used to exemplify all of the characteristics of data

to gain and understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon (Merriam, 2002).

In a critique of interpretivist approaches Hammersley (2008) argues that interpretivists assume that behaviour is in large part a function of some stable orientation that directly expresses itself in the same way in diverse contexts. There is a neglect to contextualise the way people response to variation in socio-cultural contexts and the scope for change in people's orientations over time. Where interpretivism focuses on creation of meaning and shared understanding, Hammersley (2008) also argues that there is often a failure to recognise the implication of the contextual sensitivity of what is said and done and how this is inferred from what participants say in interviews about their experience of, and action in, the world.

Hammersley (2008) also identified the need for qualitative researchers to address criticisms raised by quantitative researchers in relation to measurement, causal analysis and generalisation. Hammersley (2008) is not suggesting that interpretivist researchers should revert to positivist methodologies but that there should be an integrated approach to research that takes into account both methodological arguments of quantitative and qualitative inquiry. He also argues that qualitative researchers need to be more reflective and open-minded to recognise the constructive methodological arguments that inform their work and to engage with problems that need addressing (Hammersley, 2008).

Realism has been considered as a third paradigm offering a different position to the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Bhaskar (1978) suggests an essential element in realism is to explain underlying, often unobservable structures and mechanisms. This view of realism is supported by Baert (1998) suggesting the critical realist approach which emphasises the rigours of qualitative research that lies between social science and natural science where reality is deemed to exist separate from individuals. Critical realists argue that theories must be judged on the basis of whether they survive empirical testing, where the research methods must be appropriate to the study. Baert (1998) argues that the scientific criteria of objectivity, reliability, validity and generalisability are the extent to which

theories fit with pre-existing knowledge (epistemological assumptions) and replicated findings are deemed to be *probably true*.

Educational research has seen a shift from earlier more established scientific approaches. These were usually based on quantitative methods of data collection and statistical analysis that establish knowledge derived from analysis and interpretation of research findings. The shift from earlier established methods considers ways of investigation in the natural and social sciences, expanding knowledge and understanding within social and educational context using both quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Greene et al. 1989; Mason, 2006; Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007).

Within this research my own epistemological position takes an integrated approach using positivist and interpretivist perspectives to generate knowledge through the breadth, depth and richness of data collection and analysis (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Gadamar, 2004). My ontological assumptions for this research are based on triangulation and mixed methods approaches also drawing on critical realism (Bhasker, 1978; Baert, 1998; Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). A combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis will be used to strengthen reliability, validity, objectivity and generalisability and to see whether my research findings fit with pre-existing knowledge. I will be integrating findings through examination, explanation, exploration, confirmation, refuting and/or enriching information from different approaches and how these can provide ways of better grounding in the learning and teaching methods within my own practice that can work towards developing an understanding of transitional difficulties in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level learning.

Quantitative and Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research

Within various fields of educational research there have been criticisms of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. De Landshere (1982 p.7) argues that:

Many statistical advancements were achieved by researcher's in

education precisely because they were aware of the complexity and instability of most phenomena that they had under study, and had to look for increasingly sophisticated methods to obtain sufficient validity of measurement or indicate the limitations of their conclusions.

The changing emphasis of educational research highlights the need to go beyond statistical analysis, to discover methods of analysing narrative, using thick description (Geertz, 1973) to provide an explanation of the thoughts, feelings and understandings of the research participants themselves. Whilst statistical analysis can provide a mathematical measure that emphasises the significance of research findings, these findings themselves may be limited in terms of content and context (Baert, 1998; Scott, 2001).

Qualitative researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Yin, 2003; Mason, 2006) argue from the point of view that qualitative data can provide representations of complex patterns of social interaction rooted in the meaningful analysis of interaction. Qualitative researchers reject the positivist assumptions and favour a more exploratory approach. However, the qualitative approach can be criticised for lack of objectivity based on the subjective, interpretive views and experiences of the researcher and may lack scientific generalisability.

Although there are advantages and limitations of both quantitative and qualitative methods some researchers are now moving towards a more integrated or combined approach. Greene et al. (1998) introduced five justifications for combining quantitative and qualitative research to include: triangulation; complementarity; development; intuition; and expansion. However, this approach was criticised by Bryman (2004) in that it limited multi-strategy research to five explanations. Bryman (2004) identified different typologies of research, the classic quantitative and qualitative approaches and mixed approaches. He differentiated between mixed methodology (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998), multi-methods (Brannen, 1992), mixed methods (Creswell, 2003) and multi-strategy (Bryman, 2004).

More recently Bryman (2006) refers to multi-strategy research when integrating the use of quantitative and qualitative research in practice. He argues that there was often a mismatch between the rationale for the combined use of quantitative and qualitative research and how it was used in practice. In content analysis of journal articles Bryman (2006) suggests that almost half of the articles used multi-strategy research but failed to integrate the findings.

Greene (2008) supports the earlier findings of Bryman (2004) suggesting that interest in mixed methods has risen more from theoretical and epistemological concerns than from practice. Greene (2008) suggests the need for pragmatism to establish the importance of the dynamic interaction between theory and practice or between thinking/knowing and acting/doing. She highlights the need to identify philosophical issues including objectivity, subjectivity, and the role of values, context and contingency in social knowledge. Greene (2008) puts forward the view that there can be a synthesis of conceptual ideas relating to triangulation, complementarities, development, intuition and expansion through mixed methods research, thus also supporting the earlier view of Kanbur (2005).

Kanbur (2005) expresses the view that mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative research can jointly contribute to inquiry findings through examination, explanation, confirming, refuting and/or enriching information from one approach to another. Further support for the use of mixed methods research is provided by Hesse-Biber (2010) proposing that to conduct a mixed methods study can enhance the validity and reliability of findings and allows for the exploration of contradictions found between quantitative and qualitative results, triangulation of results can provide a more robust understanding of the results.

Greene (2008) identifies the use of assumptive frameworks within social inquiry that incorporate philosophical issues of scientific research. This includes the realism and constructivism debate as a way of knowing, or between objectivity and subjectivity as the position of the inquirer. Greene (2008) questions whether the use of mixed methods research provides philosophical frameworks in contrasting and competing assumptions of human actions identified in social inquiry. She also questions social inquiry in terms of the characteristics and

values of traditional philosophical paradigms and the role of these paradigm assumptions in social research and evaluation in practice.

Schwandt (2006) also suggests that all research is interpretive and that a multiplicity of methods can be used for different kinds of understanding, if we are to progress we need to remove the distinctions. Jones and Kennedy (2011) argue for a pluralistic approach, moving beyond 'normal science'. They support a counter-positivistic research approach where researchers actively consider alternative approaches using contrasting paradigms where discussion and reflection on counter-positive approaches support the need for pluralism. Jones and Kennedy (2011) suggest that new technologies have opened up new kinds of research which extend the range of possibilities for researchers bringing into question the division between quantitative and qualitative research, identifying the need to create links between individual research methods and overall research philosophies. As a result, they argue for a pragmatic approach to methodology which gives greater attention to the research question being addressed rather than an overall philosophical tradition.

Limitations of mixed-methods approaches in educational research

Creswell et al. (2003) suggest that mixed methods approaches convey a sense of rigour of the research and help clarify the nature of the research. However, Bryman (2006) argues that most typologies of mixed-methods or multi-strategy research have been theoretically constructed, with limited evidence of systematic methods or research. Bryman (2006) also identifies discrimination between how researchers thought about justification for multi-strategy research and how they actually combined these in practice.

Gorard and Cook (2007 p.308) put forward a compelling argument for the use of multiple methods when undertaking educational research, 'for educational research to speak to the comprehensive knowledge needs of the education policy community it can, should, and must involve multiple methods'. They also argue that different kinds of issues and research questions relate to different method preferences and that a comprehensive 'evidence-based research' must be multi-

method. Within their writing ‘Where does good evidence come from?’ Gorard and Cook (2007 p.317) identify:

One of the limitations to mixed-methods educational research as the reluctance of some researchers to work with numbers ... criticising quantitative research for using increasingly complex methods of analysis, presenting research in exclusive technical ways and for incorrectly assuming that number is the same as measuring, that reliability is the same as validity, that probabilistic statistics can be used with purposive samples or even with population figures and that any use of numbers must be based on sampling theory. This is not the way forward.

Gorard and Cook (2007) further debate methodology in relation to what policy-makers and practitioners require in the form of high-quality educational research evidence. They question whether educational research should be predominately experimental or based on mixed-methods research. They give emphasis to the concerns of quality of research, robustness of findings and security of the conclusions made. They also argue for the need for educational research to provide comprehensive knowledge within educational policy communities and as such must involve multiple methods of research. Secure findings can be generated through replication, transparency and multiple complementary methods and explicit testing of theoretical explanations. Gorard and Cook (2007) also argue that there is a need for evidence-based policy-making and practice based on more real research, where the researcher is genuinely trying to find something out.

Further criticism of the mixed methods approach by Heyvaert et al. (2011) suggests that critical appraisal of research findings is an essential step in the development of a methodologically sound review. However, they argue that although there has been considerable work on methods of synthesising findings there appears to be no one single developed framework. In later writing Heyvaert et al. (2013) argue that as mixed methods research is more than just the sum of the individual quantitative and qualitative strands of the study, then the combined application of quantitative and qualitative critical appraisal criteria is most likely

not sufficient to evaluate the methodological quality of primary mixed methods research. Heyvaert et al. (2013) suggest there should be a critical appraisal instrument that is specifically designed for mixed methods research and that the alternative of applying critical appraisal instruments for separate quantitative and qualitative strands cannot suffice. However, in a critique of Heyvaert et al. (2013) they identify the need for a relevant critical appraisal instrument for mixed methods research, yet their comments fall short of actually providing such an instrument.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Quantitative and qualitative approaches reflect differences in data collection, analysis and different theoretical underpinning informed by different views on what constitutes valid data (Bryman, 2004). Quantitative methods include questionnaires, surveys, structured interviews, experiments, and large scale comparative studies that gather data to identify correlations and patterns in which phenomena can be coded in addition to numerical and statistical analysis (Creswell, 1998).

In comparison, qualitative methods include observations, interviews using open ended questions, diaries, focus groups and informal discussions with the view to producing a coherent and illuminating description of participant's perceptions. Data gathered are interpreted by the researcher identifying possible themes that emerge from participant responses.

For this thesis, I have used a small-scale exploratory case study using a mixed-methods approach with evidence gathered from questionnaires (quantitative and qualitative data), interviews and focus groups (mainly qualitative data) using an integrated approach to explain and analyse the data. The rationale for mixing quantitative and qualitative methods within a case study approach is grounded in the fact that neither method would be sufficient in themselves to capture the complexity of the phenomenon (Greene et al. 1989; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Creswell, 2003). The method consists of gathering and analysing quantitative data followed by a second phase in which qualitative data are

gathered and analysed, findings are then integrated to enable a more robust analysis to help gain and understanding of the research problem (or research questions). The qualitative aspect helps refine and explain the earlier statistical results by providing a more in-depth exploration of the participants' views (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1989; Morse, 1991; Creswell et al. 2003). The quantitative data were collected by short questionnaires, participants responded using a Likert-type scale which was subject to statistical analysis. The qualitative data collected by a questionnaire eliciting open responses. A further method of collecting qualitative data the use of focus groups/meta-planning to gain more in-depth narrative of the students' own views of transition, and finally a small sample in individual interviews.

Ivankova et al. (2006) explain mixed-methods sequential explanatory design as consecutive phases within one study for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research problem or questions. They suggest it is not an easy method to implement as there are several methodological issues, for example, the priority or weight given to the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, and the stages at which the phases are connected and results integrated. Ivankova et al. (2006) used multiple case studies with thematic analysis of the data within and across cases. The qualitative data phase was used to explore and elaborate the results of the first phase where the contents were grounded in the quantitative results from the initial phase. Results of quantitative and qualitative data were integrated in the discussion of the entire study.

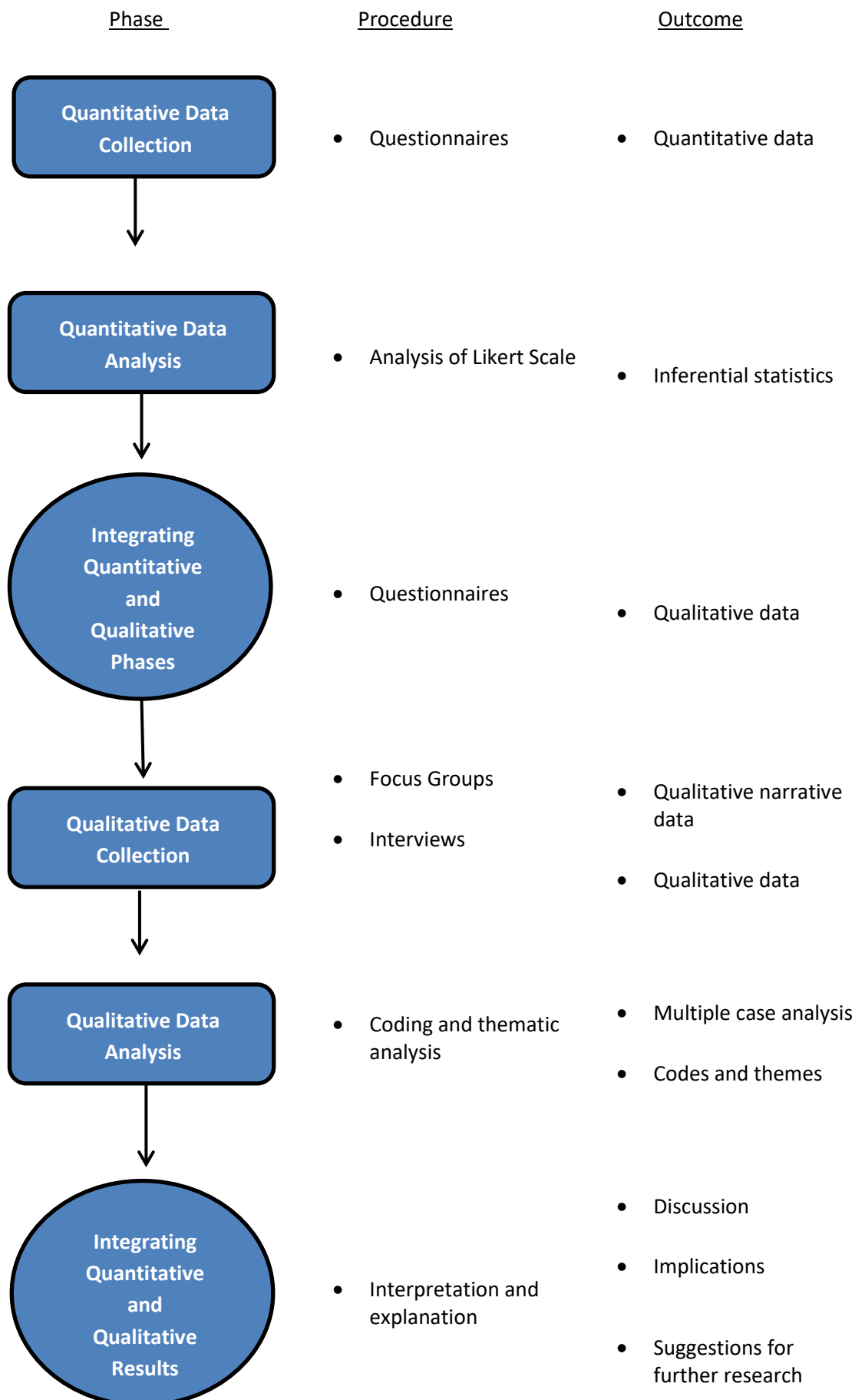
Figure 1 below (Adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) gives a visual representation of the model used in my research. The visual model of the procedure portrays the sequence of the research activities showing quantitative and qualitative phases together with integration of phases and integration of results. However, it was not strictly linear in practice as some elements of qualitative data collection were undertaken whilst the data analysis of quantitative data continued. The main justification for this was to be able to gather data at times convenient to the participants' that did not impede on revision time or examination times throughout the academic year.

The time line for data collection and analysis began in November 2013 only two months after the Year 12 students began their studies in sixth form, this was to gain their early views and experiences of the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Initially questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data (see Appendix 3 for sample questionnaire). Although there was some early statistical analysis of the quantitative data this was delayed until such times as participants were unavailable.

Qualitative data from a second set of questionnaires (see Appendix 4) was gathered through December to January 2014 followed by Focus Groups and interviews held in the following months until May 2014. Data analysis continued throughout the summer with integration of qualitative and quantitative data being completed by October 2014.

Figure 1 Model for Mixed-Methods Sequential Exploratory Design

(Adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006)



For my research, I used an exploratory approach, rather than the explanatory approach featured in the original model by Ivankova et al. (2006). Creswell (2007) suggests that exploratory studies are used to explore, to investigate little understood phenomena or behaviours and to discover any underlying patterns, themes or factors which affect them. The information and insights from exploratory studies can help develop precise research questions. In contrast within the explanatory approach, researchers are interested in explaining the forces causing a particular phenomenon, and in identifying important events, beliefs, attitudes and/or policies which might be shaping the phenomenon. Creswell (2007) also suggests that in practice, it can be difficult to distinguish between explanatory and exploratory studies, and practitioner research often includes an element of both.

Earlier research by Creswell et al. (2003) suggested that in mixed-methods research the quantitative phase is undertaken first followed by the qualitative phrase, where the quantitative data can then be refined by exploring participants' views in more depth in the qualitative phrase.

Torres (2006) also used mixed-methods of quantitative research followed by a small sample of individual interviews to consider issues of reliability and validity in case study research by considering the extent to which research findings from similar questions result in similar responses, and the extent to which the responses appear to highlight the same underlying issues, thereby gaining general agreement in responses from mixed methods research. Torres (2006) argues that using mixed methods enables the generalisability of findings to the wider population. Torres (2006) concludes that it was difficult for quantitative research to capture the complexity of real life. However, it is important to respect both traditions of quantitative and qualitative methods and to recognise which tradition will truly answer the research question.

The use of case studies in educational research

Problems have been identified in conceptualising case studies as quantitative or qualitative research. The term 'case study' has in itself given rise to debate over its definitions and use. Ragin (1992) provides two contrasting views suggesting that if cases and the categories within them are developed during the research

then they are considered to be grounded in the data, supporting Glaser and Strauss's (1989) concept of grounded theory. However, if the cases and their categories exist prior to the research then they should be considered as legitimate categories within social science research.

Hakim (1992) suggests a classification of case studies in terms of descriptive, selective and experimental, which can be used to illustrate, refine knowledge and consider human behaviour in real life settings. However, in contrast Yin (1994) argues that there are three types of case studies – exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. According to Yin (1994) the type of case study used is dependent on the nature of the research and the research question. Within this research, I will focus on exploratory case studies to identify possible transitional difficulties identified by research participants as they move from GCSE to A Level studies.

Creswell (1998) identifies dimensions for comparing five research traditions used in qualitative research. He identifies these as biographical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography and case studies. He suggests the focus of case study methods is to develop in-depth analysis of a single case or multiple cases. The origin of case studies relates to political science, sociology, evolution, urban studies and social sciences. Creswell (1998) also suggests the main source of data for case study research includes multiple sources – documents, archival records, interviews, observations and physical artefacts. He suggests data analysis could include description, themes and assertions. Narrative could also be used to support in-depth study of a 'case' or 'cases'.

Gillham (2000 p.1) suggests case studies serve the purpose of providing evidence to support claims:

A case therefore can be an individual: it can be a group such as a family or a class, or an office or a hospital ward: it can be an institution – such as a children's home, or a factory: it can be a large-scale community, a town, an industry, a profession. All of these are single cases: but you can also study multiple cases: a number of single parents: several schools, two different professions. It all depends on what you want to find out – which leads us on.

Burton (2000) considers whether case studies should be conceptualised in terms of empirical units or theoretical categories, are they theoretical and, therefore, socially constructed? Burton (2000) questions whether case study relates to a single case study or a series of cases.

Creswell (2003 p.15) defined a case study as a ‘method’ where the researcher explored in-depth, a program, an event, an activity, a process or one or more individuals’. He further expanded this definition:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed in-depth data collection, involving multiple sources of information (for example, observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports) and report a case description and case based themes. (Creswell, 2007 p.73).

Creswell (2007) suggests there are different types of case studies, the characteristics of which include different sizes, programs, activities and the intent of the case study. He describes three variations in terms of intent – the single instrumental case study with focus on one issue or concern where one bounded case is used to convey the issues; collective case study, also called a multiple case study, with focus on one issue or concern, where multiple case studies are used to convey they issues; and thirdly intrinsic case study where the focus is on the case itself and the case presents an unusual or unique situation.

Limitations of case studies in educational research

In addition to different classifications or description of case studies, there are also differences of opinion regarding their usefulness and limitations. It is generally accepted that case study research can provide enlightenment, detailed rich data specifically relating to the participants in the research. However, the criticism of case studies can be considered in terms of lack of representativeness, generalisability and rigour. Yin (1994) argues that case studies are responsive to investigator bias influencing the findings and conclusions. This, it can be argued,

further develops Yin's earlier view of case study research. Yin (1989 p.14) states that:

The case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events such as individual life-cycles, organisations and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries.

In his earlier work Bassey (1981) rejects the concept of generalisability in educational research. He suggests case study evidence (singular) could not be generalised beyond its relative use between teachers. He also argues that there was little value of relatability rather than generalisability as an important criterion by which to judge the merits of case study research. Bassey (1981 p.86) states that:

If case studies are carried out systematically and critically, and if they are aimed at the improvement of education, and if they are reliable, and if by publication of the findings they extend the boundaries of existing knowledge, then they are valid forms of educational research.

Usher (1996) supports the argument put forward by Bassey (1981) relating to the lack of generalisability in social science. Usher (1996) argues that predictions and the search for generalisation has not been realised in social and educational research, and it is questionable whether predictive knowledge is possible within the social domain. In contrast Denscombe (1998) suggests it is the extent to which findings from case study research can be generalised to other examples of its type based on the significant features that demonstrate where the case study fits in relation to the overall picture.

Denscombe's concept of 'fittingness' was supported by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggesting that theoretical construction must fit together, where patterns, concepts, categories, properties and dimensions must fit together to create constructs, which must tell the story of the phenomena. The authors

describe this as ‘coherence’ suggesting that where patterns emerge, the researcher should be able to produce data that supports the theory, if not, then they have failed to ‘fit’ the theory within the existing data.

Yet it can be argued rather than looking for generalisations from case study evidence as expected from positivist quantitative methods, we can use research evidence to examine particularities, identify commonalities and anomalies within research findings through the introduction of mixed methods approaches using multiple case studies.

Bassey (2001 pp. 5-6) has a later substantial shift in view point suggesting that whilst true scientific generalisations may not be possible, there is still relevance in what he terms ‘fuzzy generalisations’ of empirical evidence. He makes a clear distinction:

Scientific generalisation is expressed in the form: particular events lead to particular consequences; whilst the fuzzy generalisation is expressed in the form: particular events may lead to particular consequences.

Bassey (2001) put forward the idea of fuzzy generalisation reducing the traditional scientific nature of research but accepting a form of generalisation relative to specific interests in social science research. Bassey (2001 p. 17) expanded his ideal also suggesting that ‘fuzzy predictions’ can contribute to theory building:

I suggest that, wherever possible, the outcome of empirical educational research should include fuzzy predictions. The findings (or results) give an empirical statement of what has been found out about the actual people-events-situations under study. The prediction is a fuzzy generalisation which extrapolates the findings to similar people-event-situations and suggest that similar findings may be discovered elsewhere.

Gomm et al. (2002) argue that generalisation, however, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant in case study research. Researchers may seek to show general relevance

of findings, or to make generalisations within cases. Gomm et al. (2002) suggest it is the relevance of findings to professional practice that may be of importance in educational research.

Not all case study research is viewed in a negative light. Bromley (1986) suggests that case studies are the ‘bedrock of scientific evidence’. Although they are difficult to replicate, it is the unpredictability of case study research that has encouraged scientists to change paradigms or theoretical innovation. Bromley (1986) argues that scientific evidence can be valid and effective yet remain unquantifiable.

Robson (2002) comments that case studies are often qualitative, subject to criticisms of subjectivity and lack of reliability, yet experiments, surveys and other quantitative methods in ‘real’ science are in fact an accumulation of many case studies. Coolican (2009) suggests that one contrary case study can challenge assumed trends or theories of cause-and-effect relationships. Although many case studies cannot be replicated, it is their uniqueness, their strength in richness that increases realism, and that realism establishes complexity in case study research.

Although there are arguments for and against the use of case study evidence in educational research, different views of rigour, validity and generalisability of research findings, within my research I used case study research bounded within the small sixth form community where I taught at the time, using a mixed methods sequential exploratory design, integrating findings from quantitative and qualitative data.

Research Design

The initial aim of the research was to investigate why some learners experience transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. Transitional difficulties have been identified in many educational stages (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000; Zeedyk et al. 2003; Furlong et al. 2006; Coleman, 2007) and having gone through previous stages of transition this raised questions as to why were some learners still experiencing transitional difficulties in post-16 education.

This gave rise to the initial tentative research question posed at the start of the research:

What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

A mixed methods (integrated) approach was considered appropriate for this research as it would integrate findings from quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Creswell (1998) suggest that quantitative techniques can be used to identify correlations and patterns from the research findings which can then be subject to numerical and statistical analysis. As an alternative Cohen and Manion (1995) suggest qualitative methods produce coherent and illuminating description from the perspective of the participants. Ivankova et al. (2006) supports the use of an integrated approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods to create a model of mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. This model was adapted slightly and used for this research with greater weighting on the side of qualitative data.

Using a literature review to set the context and focus of the research

A literature review was conducted to set the context of the research and to help focus the questions and themes to be investigated. Textbooks, academic journals, government documents, local authority publications, examination board publications and on-line (web based) research were used providing secondary sources of information.

The initial literature review took place at the start of the research process and was frequently revisited where more avenues could be explored to help gain knowledge and understanding of what had already been investigated in this field and also to help identify any gaps in the literature. It was hoped that by identifying gaps in the literature that my own research findings would go some small way to advance knowledge and understanding of transitional difficulties

faced by some learners when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. The literature review also provided a body of evidence that could be used to compare with my own research findings.

Research Participants

Participants for the case study approach were bounded in the community of sixth form students in Cambridgeshire in the school where I was teaching at that time. Participants were in Year 12 and aged 16-19. The sixth form within the school was structured so that Year 12 students enter in September of AS (General Certificate of Education – Advanced Subsidiary) Level courses. There were also some Year 12 students taking A2 (General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level) courses and some Year 13 students taking a combination of AS and A2 courses. 7 students that took part in the research have been permitted to re-sit Year 12 if they have failed examinations or wanted to improve grades. There are also students entering sixth form who may have, for a variety of reasons, been unable to complete the year at an alternative educational establishment or who have returned to education or moved from one country to another. As a result of this mixture of learners there is variation in student ages.

A total of 147 students participated in various elements of the research which was just over 61% of the total number of students in the sixth form. A purposeful sampling method was used to ensure that only participants that had moved from GCSE to A Level studies took part in the research. Patton (1990) suggests it is important to select information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich are those cases from which we can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. Patton (1990) also suggests that it is essential to determine what criteria are important in deciding who to include and who to interview, using multiple methods to ensure the validity of the findings and that it is only through presentation and dissemination of the study's findings, that a contribution can be made to the knowledge base in a field of research and to educational practice.

Pilot Stage of the Research

Three initial pilot study interviews were conducted. These identified flaws in my own research method. Whilst the interviews were semi-structured, there was considerable variation in the way interviews were conducted and the variety of questions asked. This highlighted the need for improvement in my own interview techniques. A pilot study was then conducted using short questionnaires designed to gather quantitative data. This focused on just 5 questions with a Likert type scale response ranging from 1 to 5. The pilot went well and only minor amendments were made.

A further pilot study with 5 participants was conducted using a questionnaire designed to gain in-depth information. However, feedback from those taking part in the pilot study felt that the questionnaire was too long and took too much time to complete. The original questionnaire had 46 questions, this was re-evaluated and the number of questions was significantly reduced. The structure changed to remove predominately closed questions and include more open ended questions giving scope for participants to include their own comments.

The final pilot study was a method of data collection through focus groups using meta-planning (Davies et al. 2001). 7 students were initially involved in the meta-planning to identify their experiences of learning within A Level studies including positive and negative factors relating to their expectations and experiences of learning within the sixth form community. Again, this highlighted areas for improvement especially in the standardised instructions used. It was important that I gave sufficient information to the students to be able to complete the activity, but I also wanted to avoid giving too much information which may have resulted in demand characteristics of students feeling they needed to 'fit' with my ideas rather than basing responses on their own views and opinions.

The process for meta-planning involved three large A3 coloured sheets of card that were placed around the room, one headed 'expectations' another headed 'positive/helpful' and the final sheet headed 'limitations/barriers/negative'. Participants in the pilot group were then given 4 post-it notes and asked to write down one at a time four different comments of the expectations of A Level studies and to place these on the 'expectations sheet'. Participants were then

asked to repeat this process twice for the limitations/barriers/negative sheet and positive/helpful sheet. When this was completed participants were asked to look at the comments placed on each sheet and to place these into themes, groups or categories that went together and to label these. Once this was completed each student was given 9 coloured dots and asked to place three dots on each sheet by way of ranking the themes/groups/categories that the individual comments had been placed into. Participants could place one, two or three dots for each category depending on their own interpretation of importance. Any questions raised during the activity were answered briefly to give assistance but where possible to avoid researcher bias.

After completion of the activity a general group discussion was introduced by myself as researcher and then I slowly withdrew my comments until the discussion was mainly student-orientated. Students were given several sheets of plain paper on which to make comments/notes/bullet points as they felt necessary. This had not been part of the original task but the students in the pilot group asked to do this. It seemed a useful way of gaining greater insight into the participants' view and opinions so it was later continued within the main focus group.

Undertaking the pilot studies helped improve my techniques for gathering information from questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Feedback from participants helped identify flaws in my research design and enabled improvements to be made before the main research was undertaken.

Reviewing the research questions

The pilot studies and literature review have helped establish the focus of my research and to further develop my research questions expanding on the original one question I now have three main research questions to develop and explore:

- What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

- What internal factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?
- What external factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Internal factors relate to institutional criteria arising from the educational provision within the sixth form at the school where I was teaching at the time of conducting the research. The external factors relate to any event or situation outside the educational establishment (for example, social factors including family, home life, employment, friendships, relationships and so forth).

Methods of data gathering

The initial stage of data gathering (see Figure 1) of the model for mixed-methods sequential exploratory design related to quantitative data collection. 80 participants were used from a purposeful sampling technique. Each participant was given a briefing outlining the research and what was expected of them and then asked to complete an informed consent form. Participants then completed a short questionnaire ranking their answers using a Likert type scale (Likert, 1932). On completion of the questionnaire participants were debriefed and asked if they had any questions. They were then thanked for their time and for completing the questionnaire. (See Appendix 3 for sample questionnaire).

Using a questionnaire to gather quantitative data has both strengths and limitations. The strengths can be identified in terms of a small amount of questions and possible responses reduced the time taken for completion and reduced the need for participants to expand their responses to include personal views and opinions. It provides a simple way of gathering data that could be statistically analysed to produce a mathematical measure of the significance of the findings from the research within a positivist approach (Baert, 1998). However, the same technique limited the participant responses in terms of content

and context, it removed the need for discourse that would be open to a more exploratory approach (Scott, 2001). Yet the gathering of qualitative data from the first questionnaire was only the initial part of data gathering would eventually lead to a mixed methods approach to data gathering and analysis.

The second stage of data gathering was a detailed questionnaire with open questions producing qualitative data which was completed by a further 40 participants. Participants were briefed as to the nature of the research and then completed an informed consent sheet. Participants were also given the opportunity to raise any questions before and after completion of the questionnaire. Once completed they were thanked for their time and for taking part in the research. (Note: one participant later requested their data was not used resulting in a total of 39 participants completing the questionnaire). (See Appendix 4 for sample questionnaire).

This questionnaire was beneficial in that it allowed participants more time for completion with sufficient space to add their own views and opinions. It enables gathering far more detailed responses (Cohen and Manion, 1995). However, analysing participant discourse would be more complex and time consuming than statistical analysis of quantitative data. Further criticism could be identified as lack of objectivity in the exploratory interpretivist approach to data analysis (Robson, 2002).

The next method of qualitative data gathering was meta-planning (Davies et al. 2001). There were 3 focus groups consisting of a total of 19 participants. Group 1 consisted of 6 participants, Group 2 consisted of 6 participants and Group 3 had 7 participants. Again, a purposeful sampling method was used to ensure that the case study evidence was only drawn from participants bounded within the sixth form centre where the research was conducted. Participants were briefed as to the nature of the research and the activities they were to take part in for the meta-planning and then asked to complete an informed consent form. On completion of the meta-planning activity groups were encouraged to openly discuss their views on the themes/categories/groups and to discuss any other factors that emerged from the activities (see pp. 79-80 for further description of the meta-

panning technique). At the end of the activities participants were thanked for their time and participation and invited to ask any questions.

The advantages of using focus groups to gather qualitative data was in the openness and sharing of discourse between participants. After the initial instructions provided, participants were given free rein to continue the activities only asking limited questions to the researcher for clarity and guidance. This gave rise to a large amount of debate, argument and re-evaluation of their own comments, enabling the participants to change their responses without encompassing the subjectivity from the point of view of the researcher. The result of which providing a large amount of qualitative data (see Appendix 5 – samples of students' responses to meta-planning activities).

There were only a few disadvantages of using focus groups, firstly it proved very time consuming for 2 out of the three groups that became immersed in the activities. Also, as it produced a large quantity of qualitative data, analysis would be complex and time consuming. However, these limitations would be outweighed by the depth and richness of the data provided.

The final part of data gathering was from 8 semi-structured interviews producing qualitative data. Participants were given a brief outline of the research and then completed an informed consent form. On completion of each interview the participants were thanked for their time and participation and given the opportunity to ask any questions. The interviews were similar in nature but the semi-structured method used resulted in variation between some of the questions asked. Interviews took between 45 minutes and an hour to conduct, although more time was available where needed. A few initial questions were asked and then the responses given led to a flow from one question to the next and were adapted depending on the response previously given. (see Appendix 9 for sample interview transcripts).

The advantages of conducting semi-structures interviews was the ability to let the conversation flow, to enable to participants to provide detailed accounts of their own experiences of the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Although only a small number of individual interviews were conducted, these produced a large amount of data to be analysed at a later date.

The main limitations of interviews as a method of data collection is in their alleged lack of generalisability. However, this research focused on a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, focus group activities and interviews. As suggested by Torres (2006) mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative research followed by a small sample of individual interviews can improve issues of reliability and validity in case study research by identifying the extent to which findings from similar questions appear to highlight the same underlying issues.

Methods of analysing data

This thesis is based on a small-scale exploratory case study approach which draws upon the principles of Grounded Theory and research into mixed methods or multi-strategy methods to determine the framework for my research. I used a model for mixed methods sequential exploratory design consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data (Ivankova et al. 2006). Analysis of mixed methods research emphasises the need for validity and authority. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) suggest the concept of inference quality, design quality and interpretive rigour as standards for assessing integrated mixed methods studies. Whilst Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) support the concept of legitimization as a way of judging the quality of mixed methods research, they argue for a continuous, iterative, interactive and dynamic process rather than procedural, rule-guided construction of inferences. They also claim that good mixed methods research should generate important insights or understandings that would not have been accomplished by using only one method.

Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) suggest that mixed methods research is more than a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. They describe a ‘deliberate inclusive’ definition of mixed methods research in which the data are collected, analysed, findings integrated and inferences drawn from quantitative and qualitative approaches or methods in a single study or programme of inquiry.

Within this current research the quantitative data provided from the Likert type scale from responses on the questionnaire were analysed using Complex Chi Squared inferential statistical analysis. The Likert type scale provides ordinal (ranked) data. However, the use of the Likert scale has given rise to debate in terms of analysis (Kuzon et al, 1996; Jamieson, 2004; Knapp, 2013). For the purposes of the current research the Likert scale data will be considered ordinal, a non-parametric test was therefore used as this did not require normally distributed data and can be used with small sample sizes (Kuzon et al. 1996).

The qualitative data gathered from the questionnaires, focus groups/meta-planning, and from the interviews were analysed using the constant comparative methods. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe the constant comparative method of data analysis as a method of breaking down the data into discrete 'incidents' or 'units' and coding them into categories. In a similar way, Lincoln and Guba (2000) describe the use of a constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis as the process of stimulated thought that lead to both descriptive and explanatory categories, to enable the accumulation of sufficient knowledge to lead to greater understanding.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) created the idea of grounded theory which was also used in analysis of the qualitative data originating from the semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory is widely used in natural and social sciences, emerging wherever data are allowed to directly generate knowledge rather than being used to verify and test hypotheses. It provides transparency to one part of the conceptualisation process, where concepts, initially in the form of codes, emerge directly from the data in order to facilitate conceptual insight. A hierarchical method is used where individual codes emerge from the data and are then used to generate insight into more general concepts and thematic statements. Coding is initially open-ended, undertaken on a line-by-line basis where the data are broken down and identified concepts which can be embedded within individual statements. Grounded theory is data driven with themes emerging through a process of constant comparisons.

However, in a critique of grounded theory Wasserman et al. (2009) argue that grounded theory fails to provide a systematic way of using data at specific levels

of scale (or codes). Yet within my own research it is the systematic method used in line-by-line and word-by-word coding of participant responses that identifies insights emerging directly from the data to gain knowledge and understanding of transitional difficulties identified by the research participants. By drawing on the principles of grounded theory and using the constant comparative method for analysing qualitative data I aim to incorporate descriptive and exploratory categories of data analysis and reduce some of the criticisms surrounding the use of positivist or interpretivist approaches, working towards fully integrated findings (Bryman, 2006).

The final part of the model for mixed methods sequential exploratory design considers integration of research findings from quantitative and qualitative data to support philosophical issues including objectivity, subjectivity and context (Bryman, 2004; Ivankova et al. 2006; Greene, 2008). The integration focuses on interpretation and exploration of findings, to discuss the implications of the research, to see whether the findings, albeit in a very small way, increases knowledge and fill some of the gaps in the literature relating to transitional difficulties in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies and to identify possible areas for further research.

Ethical considerations

Research was conducted following Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). This provides for the protection of participants and practitioners in educational research. Before the start of data gathering I obtained written informed consent from the Director of Sixth Form where the research was conducted. Access was not a problem as I was teaching at the school where the research was conducted.

Participants completing the pilot study and questionnaires were asked to read and complete a written consent form. This was always separate from the completed questionnaires to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Participants in the semi-structures interviews and focus groups completed informed consent forms, after a detailed explanation of ethical issues including confidentiality and the

right to withdraw. It was decided not to obtain written parental consent as all participants were aged between 16 and 19 years of age as the Director of Sixth Form provided consent as gatekeeper for the learners in the sixth form. (Note: some of the participants lived independently, not with parents or other family members).

Research was conducted in classrooms and the common room used by the students when not in lessons, this was done to increase familiarity with surroundings and to reduce possible distress or anxiety of participants. Briefing and debriefing were used to ensure participants understood the nature of the research and were happy to continue with the research and to enable any questions to be asked that might have arisen as a result of participation.

The researcher relationship was important in terms of access, power, deception, confidentiality and so forth. It was recognised that interviews involving the dialogue between researcher and participants drew on their own social backgrounds and personalities. Although objectivity cannot be completely achieved, openness and disclosure would help reduce subjectivity and elements of bias. There will always be an element of power in the relationship between researcher and participant especially when that relationship is also teacher-student, however, the power element, openness, disclosure and reliability were addressed by enabling the participants to read through interview transcripts and make recommendations for amendments, if necessary, and reminding the participants of their right to withdraw.

Ethical issues including confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout. Responsibility for the research process and respect for participants was essential. Accuracy and honesty in the interview transcripts, questionnaire responses and data analysis were maintained. Any information gathered, whether personal disclosures or those relating to the interviews and questionnaire were kept safely and not left in classrooms. Information was retained at my own home to prevent access. Dissemination of findings would not be shared with the school where the research was conducted until such time that any future reader may show further interest after completion and publication of the final thesis. (Addendum: I am grateful for the guidance provided of the Human Research

Ethics Committee in helping me correctly address issues relating to consent forms and information sheets).

Chapter summary

This chapter focuses on the research methodology providing the rationale and justification for the methods selected and the way in which they were used (Stierer and Antoniou, 2000).

It takes into consideration concepts of epistemology and ontology, the two main paradigms of positivism and interpretivism and the arguments for and against the use of quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 1989; Gadamer, 2004; Hammersley, 2008). There is also brief mention of realism as a third paradigm used to explain underlying, unobservable structures and mechanisms (Bhasker 1978; Baert, 1998).

The shift in recent educational research has focused on combining quantitative and qualitative methods that can jointly contribute to inquiry findings through examination, explanation, confirming, refuting and/or enriching information from one approach to another (Creswell, 2003; Kanbur, 2005; Torres, 2006). Ivankova et al. (2006) provide a model of mixed methods sequential explanatory design to give a better understanding of the research problem and questions. This was modified and used within the current research to gather and integrate findings from both quantitative and qualitative data.

The chapter continues with an explanation of the use of purposeful sampling and the research participants selected. Pilot studies were conducted using questionnaires, meta-planning/focus groups and interviews. The feedback from the pilot studies helped identify flaws and ambiguities in the design that could be addressed before the main research was conducted. The earlier use of a literature review and the feedback from the pilot studies lead to a review of the original research questions.

The chapter further reflects on methods of gathering and analysing quantitative and qualitative data and integrating the findings to enable interpretation and

exploration of findings, to discuss the implications of the research, to see whether the findings, albeit in a very small way, increased knowledge and fill some of the gaps in the literature relating to transitional difficulties in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies and to identify possible areas for further research.

The chapter concludes with comments on ethical issues, obtaining consent and access for the research to be undertaken and the needs to conduct research with respect and diligence following Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). It was also identified that although objectivity cannot be completely achieved, openness and disclosure would help reduce subjectivity and elements of bias within the research undertaken.

Chapter 4 – Results

Introduction

The previous chapter focuses on the research methodology which frames this research within a small-scale exploratory case study drawing on the principles of grounded theory and critical realism. It explains data gathering and analysis using a mixed-methods approach to integrate quantitative and qualitative data and to enable interpretation and exploration of findings.

This chapter will focus on the results of data gathered using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) with consecutive phases to gain a better understanding of the research problem or questions raised. As proposed by Creswell et al. (2003) the quantitative phase was undertaken first followed by the qualitative phase, where the quantitative data and analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem which can then be refined by exploring participants' views in more depth within the qualitative phase. Results of both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated and will be considered further in the discussion section that follows this chapter. Results with focus on:

- Quantitative data gathered from questionnaires
- Qualitative data gathered from questionnaires
- Qualitative data gathered from focus groups
- Qualitative data gathered from individual interviews.

Quantitative data gathered from questionnaires

80 Participants completed a questionnaire giving responses on a Likert type scale ranked from 1 – 5 where 1 indicated a more negative response and 5 indicated a far more positive response. Eleven questions were used to gather quantitative data (see Appendix 3 for Questionnaire). Although a total of 80 participants is a relatively small amount for quantitative research, it does account for just over

33% of the total student population in the sixth form where the research was undertaken. Data were analysed using a complex chi squared non-parametric inferential statistical test.

Table 1 – Participant responses to Question 1

How do you feel you have coped with the transition (shift/changes) from GCSE studies to A Level studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	Very badly	Not that well	OK	Quite well	Very well
Total number of participant responses	20	44	2	9	5
Percentage of total responses	25%	55%	2.5%	11.25%	6.25%

Table 1 shows responses to the first question. From the responses, it can be seen that in total 80% of participants did not feel they were coping well with the transition (shift/changes) from GCSE to A Levels whilst in comparison 20% considered it in a more positive light suggesting they have coped better with the transition than the majority of participants.

Table 2 – Participant responses to Question 2

How supportive do you feel your new teachers have been in your transition from GCSE to A Level Studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all	Not that much	OK	Quite a lot	A considerable amount
Total number of participant responses	6	10	12	42	10
Percentage of total responses	7.5%	12.5%	15%	52.5%	12.5%

Table 2 shows that 20% of respondents did not feel they were being supported or received very little support from their new teachers for A Level studies. This compared to a total of 80% of respondents that felt they were receiving an OK amount, quite a lot or a considerable amount of support. This means that the majority of participants feel that they are being supported by their A Level teachers.

Table 3 – Participant responses to Question 3

How difficult have you found the workload when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	Considerably difficult	Quite hard	OK	Not too bad	Not at all difficult
Total number of participant responses	31	37	3	5	4
Percentage of total responses	38.75%	46.25%	3.75%	6.25%	5.0%

Table 3 shows that a high level of participants (85%) found the workload at A Level studies considerably difficult or quite hard compared to a total of 15% of participants that found the workload to be ok, not too bad, or not at all difficult. This indicates a substantial difference between participants and means that the majority of the participants found the workload difficult for A Level studies.

Table 4 – Participant responses to Question 4

How much effort do you feel you have put into your A Level studies compared to GCSE studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	None	Not much	OK	Quite a lot	A considerable amount
Total number of participant responses	4	49	10	7	10
Percentage of total responses	5%	61.25%	12.5%	8.75%	12.5%

Participant responses to Question 4 shown in Table 4 shows that a total of 66.25% of participants made no effort or very little effort with their A Level studies compared to 33.75% that felt they had put an ok amount, quite a lot, or a considerable amount of effort into their A Level studies. On reflection, it was unfortunate that the nature of the questions asked within the questionnaire did not give rise to further exploration of why some participants indicated they made no or very little effort with their A Level studies. This could have been a useful area to develop further.

Table 5 – Participant responses to Question 5

Have you made good use of your private study time (free periods) to do work outside lessons?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all	Very little	About half	Quite a lot	Very effectively
Total number of participant responses	29	26	10	9	6
Percentage of total responses	36.25%	32.5%	12.5%	11.25%	7.5%

Table 5 shows the participant responses in relation to question 5 regarding the use of free periods or more accurately private study time. In total 68.75% of respondents either did not use free periods effectively or suggested they made very little effective use of this time compared to a total of 31.25% of participants that used about half, quite a lot or were using their free periods very effectively. Again, on reflection the nature and structure of the questionnaire did not leave scope to investigate this further.

Table 6 – Participant responses to Question 6

Have you experienced any external factors (i.e. events outside the sixth form) that have caused you difficulties in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies e.g. home life/family life?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	A large amount	Quite a lot	OK	Not that many	None
Total number of participant responses	27	23	5	10	15
Percentage of total responses	33.75%	28.75%	6.25%	12.5%	18.75%

Table 6 shows the response to question 6. This was a general question to see if students felt there were any outside/external factors that may have contributed to transitional difficulties they may have experienced. This is a broad area and did not seek individual explanation from participants; this was explored further in the qualitative aspects of the data gathering. In total 62.5% of participants indicated that they did feel there were external factors that had caused difficulties in transition.

Table 7 – Participant responses to Question 7

Has your part-time job had a negative impact on your transition from GCSE to A Level studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	A huge amount	Quite a lot	OK	Not much	No
Total number of participant responses	18	32	4	7	9
Percentage of total responses	22.5%	40%	5%	8.75%	11.25%

Table 7 shows participant responses in relation to part-time job. Results show that 62.5% of respondents felt that their part-time work was having a negative impact on their transition from GCSE to A Level studies. This compared to a total of 37.5% of respondents did not feel their part-time job had a negative impact. This means that the majority of students that had part-time jobs considered this as having a negative impact on their transition.

It should be noted that 10 participants ticked the box on the questionnaire indicating that they did not have a part-time job.

Table 8 – Participant responses to Question 8

Have new friendship groups caused you any difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	Considerably difficult	Quite hard	OK	Not too bad	Not at all difficult
Total number of participant responses	11	15	2	17	35
Percentage of total responses	13.75%	18.75%	2.5%	21.25%	43.75%

Table 8 shows that fewer participants (32.5%) felt that new friendship groups caused difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies, however, a far greater proportion (64.5%) indicating that new friendship groups did not cause difficulties. This means that forming new friendships may have a positive impact on transition for a majority of participants.

Table 9 – Participant responses to Question 9

How stressful did you find the transition from GCSE to A Level studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	Extremely	Quite stressful	OK	Not very stressful	Not stressful
Total number of participant responses	19	35	8	10	8
Percentage of total responses	23.75%	43.75%	10%	12.5%	10%

Participant responses to Question 9 shown in Table 9 shows that a total of 67.5% of participants indicated that they felt extremely stressful or quite stressful in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. This compares to 32.5% of participants that did not feel that it was too stressful. However, the question only asked how stressful participants found the transition? This an area that could have been investigated further to identify which factors actually caused the stress.

Table 10 – Participant responses to Question 10

Do you feel you were sufficiently prepared for the increased level of work when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	No	Very little	OK amount	Quite a lot	Fully prepared
Total number of participant responses	29	29	4	11	7
Percentage of total responses	36.25%	36.25%	5%	13.75%	8.75%

Table 10 shows the participant responses in relation to question 10 indicating whether participants felt they were prepared for the increase in level of work when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. The responses show that 72.5% of participants felt they were not prepared for the increase in level of work. Again, on reflection, the nature and structure of the questionnaire did not leave scope to investigate this further

Table 11 – Participant responses to Question 11

Did you do any summer work for your new A Level courses e.g. research, reading, reading the syllabus etc.?

Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
	None	Very little	OK amount	Quite a lot	A considerable amount
Total number of participant responses	38	27	5	1	9
Percentage of total responses	47.5%	33.75%	6.25%	1.25%	11.25%

Table 11 refers to participant responses regarding summer work in preparation for the new A Level courses to be taken by participants. A high amount (81.25%)

indicated that they had not done any or had done very little preparation over the summer for their new courses. This is an area that will be discussed further in the discussion section that follows. It should be noted that not all students attended open days or induction days prior to the start of the new A Level courses, and for some subject's summer work may not have actually been set for students to complete prior to starting their new courses.

Table 12 – Summary of participant responses to all questions on the questionnaire

Description - Participant responses to questionnaire					
Likert Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Question 1	20	44	2	9	5
Question 2	6	10	12	42	10
Question 3	31	37	3	5	4
Question 4	4	49	10	7	10
Question 5	29	26	10	9	6
Question 6	23	27	5	10	15
Question 7	18	32	4	7	9
Question 8	11	15	2	17	35
Question 9	19	35	8	10	8
Question 10	29	29	4	11	7
Question 11	38	27	5	1	9
Total scores	228	331	65	128	118

Table 12 provides a summary of the responses to the questionnaire producing quantitative data as part of the overall mixed methods research design using a small-scale case study approach.

Data gathered from all 80 participants was analysed using a Complex Chi Squared non-parametric inferential statistical test.

With 40 degrees of freedom and 0.005 level of significance, the critical value of chi squared (from the data) was 284.331 which was greater than the stated value of 66.766 (see Appendix 6 for Chi-Squared table). Therefore, the results were

significant. This means that the data gathered from the questionnaires does show that participants have experienced transitional difficulties when moving from GSCE to A Level studies. Integration of results from both quantitative and qualitative data will be discussed further in the discussion chapter that follows.

Qualitative data gathered from questionnaires

40 participants originally completed the questionnaire, but one was subsequently disregarded at the specific request of the participant. The remaining 39 questionnaires were analysed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). There were 4 open questions on the questionnaire which was designed to give participants sufficient space to give detailed responses. (see Appendix 4 for questionnaire). For each question participant responses were noted, compared, coded and categorised in a systematic way, they were compared further and put into responding groups based on the themes emerging from the data. This enabled the exploration and elaboration within and across responses and later integration of quantitative and qualitative data, which allowed raw data to be analysed within the conceptual framework of my research and through the earlier literature review. (see Appendix 8 for sample of completed questionnaires).

Question 1 – How well do you feel you have coped with the changes from GCSE to A Level Studies? Please give as much detail as possible.

There were several main themes identified within the data. There were more negative comments made compared to positive or neutral comments. Negative comments often related to difficulty in coping and feeling pressured. For example:

Participant 13 responded “I feel as if there’s more pressure and less time to cope with deadlines and work and haven’t been able to adjust”.

Participant 26 responded “I think I am coping fine in lessons. However, it is very difficult in the work we get set. Essays are harder to do than GCSE’s and there is more to learn in individual subjects. It’s harder to cope with the pressure of having to learn and revise everything quickly”.

Positive comments were far fewer but mainly related to coping quite well and having less subjects compared to GCSE’s making it easier to cope.

Question 2 – What has been beneficial/helpful to you as you have moved from GCSE to A Level Studies? Please give as much information as you can.

There were far more comments to Question 2 compared to Question 1. Several students made more than one response. 3 participants did not make any comments to this question. As the question only asked what has been beneficial/helpful, only positive responses were given. For example:

Participant 11 responded “More motivation to do homework. Learnt to take responsibility. Feel more mature. Feel as if I am in control of my life”.

Participant 14 responded “The support from teachers was beneficial as it helped transition smoothly”.

Question 3 – What has caused problems/barriers/difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies? Please feel free to expand your comments.

Participants provided a wide variety of comments to this question. Several participants gave more than one response but two participants did not make a comment. Due to the nature of the question asked, responses and the emerging themes from the data were predominately negative and often referring to internal factors including:

Participant 18 “The level of work for some subjects is a reasonable jump, however, others like Maths and Sciences are very much harder”.

Participant 6 “Stress, coursework, deadlines, expectations, transport, social issues (friends), exams”.

However, one participant did make positive comments:

Participant 15 “Nothing, in fact it has caused advantages into my life”.

A further comment of interest was made by Participant 33, as with some of the comments of Participant 6, this also referred to transport as a problem/barrier/difficulty in transition highlighting external factor that can affect transition from GCSE to A Level studies:

Participant 33 “Travel, because I live far away and I have to get up early and get home a lot later meaning I have to manage my time better than I did when doing GCSE’s”.

This comment was reflected by several other participants. Some may not live a long distance from the college but transport was a considerable problem. For Participant 33 the journey each way was in excess of two hours.

Question 4 – How much effort do you feel you have actually put into all of your work since moving from GCSE to A Level Studies? Please give further detail and explanation for your comments.

There were a lot of responses to this question with several students making more than one response but 4 participants made no comment. Responses were coded, grouped and categorised producing positive, negative and neutral responses including:

Participant 4 “At this very moment, not a lot, however, we as students only have one shot at this so in the new year my goal would be to put shed loads of work in, because it will soon pay off”.

Participant 30 “At the start I put in as much effort as I possible could as I know I really want to do well and it would be a great head start to my independent life to have great A Levels. However, as the year progresses I have notice my work ethic fall because the work is that much harder and a lot of it to keep up with”.

From the qualitative data gathered from the questionnaires completed by 39 participants themes were beginning to emerge that show student perceptions of transition that included both positive and negative aspects of transition but also internal factors relating to the institutional criteria arising from the educational provision within the sixth form such as workload and having to adjust to A Level subjects and external factors which relate to any event or situation outside the educational establishment, for example, transport problems.

Qualitative data gathered from Focus Groups

The brainstorming and ranking activities used a simplified version of the meta-planning technique developed by Davies et al. (2001) (see pp. 79-80 for further description of meta-planning). Analysis of data from the focus groups used a constant comparative method providing a systematic process of analysis. Each group provided different responses which were systematically combined, coded and categorised and then compared further to identify groups of responses based on the themes emerging from the focus group activities. These were grouped based on expectations, positive factors and negative factors when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. (see Tables 13, 14 and 15 for results). Initially quantitative data was constructed from the data analysis but it was the qualitative data from the focus group discussions that was used to provide more in-depth explanation of the views and opinions of participants. (see Appendix 6 for transcript of Focus Group 1 discussions following the meta-planning activity).

Table 13 – Focus Groups – Expectations when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Theme/Categories	Number of votes
Academic achievement	12
Friendship	11
Learning	3
Activities/Social Life/Enjoyment	5
Support	6
Freedom/Independence	6
Difficulty of work	8
Class sizes	1
The Future	1
Exams	2
Being treated like an adult	1
Textbooks	1

Reflections from all three focus groups

For the first activity relating to ‘expectations’, there are some emerging themes that are becoming evident in the comments and categories from all three focus groups. For example, ‘Friends’ or ‘Friendships’ were included in the first two groups but not by the third group. Comments within the category include ‘have more international friends’, ‘to make my first friend’ and ‘to have lots of new friends’. As a category ‘Friends/friendships’ received the second highest number of votes (11 votes) from the focus groups. This suggests that participants placed a considerable importance of forming and maintaining friendships within sixth form. The importance of friendships has been reflected in previous literature (Bourdieu, 1986; Taylor, 1989; Moos, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Field, 2003). More recent evidence from Wilcox et al (2005) suggests that the emotional support provided by friends and family can have a ‘buffering’ effect against the stressful experiences of being alone in new situations.

Another emerging category is ‘Academic achievement’ including ‘Grades’ where comments include ‘achieve decent grades as AS/A level that will aid me in future success’, ‘to get the best grade I could achieve’ and ‘to work hard and get good exam results’. These were categories on two out of the three focus groups and received a total of 12 votes. These resonate with the views of Williams et al. (2008) identifying transition as a positive discourse, of challenge, growth and achievement with positive focus on progression and outcome. They are also reflected in the views of Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2001) suggesting that not all transition is an obstacle, but an opportunity to develop through distinct social and academic demands.

‘Support’ also featured in two of the three focus groups, receiving a total of 6 votes. Whilst comments within this category included ‘to have supportive teachers’ and ‘to get on with my teachers’ it also included the comment ‘not having stress’. The need for support was highlighted by Giddens (1991) suggesting that individuals need a sense of ontological security which provides a sense of continuity and order in events.

Table 14 – Focus Groups – Positive factors considered helpful/beneficial when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Themes/Categories	Number of votes
Revision	4
Interests	6
Friends/getting on with people	6
Support	8
Ambitions/opportunities/goals	9
Independence	5
Lessons	3
Teachers/support/feedback on work/encouragement	11
Class sizes	5

Reflections from all three focus groups

There was greater variation in the comments made on post-its and the categories and themes provided by the participants. 'Support' was the main thread running through all three focus groups receiving 8 votes in total. Comments from 'Support' categories include 'support and advice from teachers i.e. using past papers for revision', 'folder organisation', 'teacher support' and 'family support'. However, there was some overlap between categories which included 'Friends and support' and 'Support'.

'Friends' provided another thread running through all three focus groups with categories including 'getting on with people' and 'friends'. There was some comparison across and between groups in descriptions and categories or themes used. For example, these include 'made friends', 'my family support my heavily', 'friend support' and 'friends helping with work/working together'.

Categories and themes were not mutually exclusive, for example, Focus Group 1 included 'friends' and 'teacher support' within the category 'Getting on with people' but also included 'made friends', 'teacher support' and 'friendly staff' within the category 'Friends and support'.

'Teachers' is a category identified by Focus Group 3 which included a lot of comments including 'teacher feedback', 'encouragement from teachers' and 'teachers going through past papers' and as a category received 11 votes.

However, the category was not mutually exclusive comments were also included by Focus Group 1 'teacher support' 'support and advice from teachers i.e. using

past papers for revision’ under the title ‘Friends and support’. Whilst Focus Group 2 also include ‘teacher support’ under the title ‘Support’.

Friendship and support are threads that run between both Expectations (see Table 13) and Positive Factors (see Table 14) from the comments and categories/themes provided by the focus group activities and can be reflected within the literature (Giddens, 1991; Riele, 2004; Williams et al. 2008; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011).

Table 15 – Focus Groups – Negative factors considered unhelpful/barriers/difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Themes/Categories	Number of votes
Stress	10
Time management/deadlines	9
Having to work independently	17
Distraction	3
Lack of support	3
Lack of feedback for work	2
Social life	4
Family pressure/family responsibilities	6
Sport	3

Reflections from all three focus groups

There was considerable variation in the comments made and the categories and themes identified by the participants in the three focus groups in relation to negative factors relating transition from GCSE to A Level Studies. One of the main threads identified as running through all three groups is ‘Stress’ these included the most comments including ‘high levels of stress’, ‘stressful deadlines’, ‘the stress of travelling and getting to/from lessons on time’ and ‘pressure’. ‘Stress’ as a category received a total of 10 votes. However, the categories are not mutually exclusive, for example, ‘stress and family pressure’ also appears for Focus Group 1 under the category ‘Family’. Focus Group 3 also

includes 'exams' under the title 'Time management and deadlines' whilst Focus Group 2 identifies 'exam stress' under the title 'Stress'.

'Time management' as a category only appears on the results from Focus Group 3. It contains several comments including 'exams', 'too many deadlines', 'time management' and 'worrying about deadlines and exams'. Although the category only appears for Focus Group 3 the comments are not mutually exclusive and also appear, for example, under the category 'Stress' as 'stressful deadlines'. As highlighted by Bourdieu (1986) individuals need to establish mental structures through which they can then cope with the social world (*habitus*). Individuals need to develop internalised schemas through which they perceive the world. These findings resonate with Lawton et al. (2004) suggesting that lack of independent learning, skills, time management, self-discipline, organisation and not taking the initiative are barriers to learning.

Whilst the meta-planning activity provided a small but useful amount of quantitative data but the more important aspect was then using the activity to form the basis of reflective discussions within the focus groups to provide more in-depth qualitative data from systematic analysis of the content of the group discussions. One initial question was asked:

What have you discovered from taking part in these activities?

The comments made by students within each focus group provided some of the most illuminating feedback as they shared views and opinions within the groups. A few further questions were asked to encourage the participants to expand their views. Some participants contributed greater amount than others but by the end of each discussion group activity, it was noted that everyone had made some contribution (see Appendix 7 for transcript of Focus Group 1 discussion). There were, however, two participants that decided it would be fun to add inappropriate comments. After completion of the activity and when participants had departed, these comments were removed and not included in the data.

There were some differences in the way the three focus groups discussed the activities. Focus Group 1 became more involved in the discussion, they expressed views and opinions relating to the categories and the comments made within the categories. As a Group, they were more persuasive with their views and gave justification for their comments. Interestingly they changed their minds on what was more important and following the discussion did not agree with the votes they had originally given. For example, for initial expectations the group had given 8 votes to 'Friendships' but after discussion they decided that 'Learning' was more important even though as a category it originally received no votes. Their decisions of importance were reached after shared discourse (Sapir, 1921; Foucault, 1972; Bourdieu, 1983, 1986; Portes, 1998).

Focus Group 2 also considered a consensus approach, justifying their views and opinions and again considering each other's verbal contributions to the discussion much more than just the number of votes that were earlier cast for each category. Again, there was far more shared discourse compared to Focus Group 3. Decisions of importance were again re-evaluated based on discussion and justification. Although there was some agreement of importance in relation to the number of votes there was also change. For example, when discussing 'Expectations' initially more votes (6) had been given to 'Friends' but after discussion it was agreed that 'Grades' were more important even though initially only receiving 3 votes.

There are similarities between the comments of Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2 as both changed a category that had received most votes 'Friends' to categories that had received less or no votes, this suggesting that whilst they recognised friendships as important, other more important categories related more to learning and outcome (Galton et al, 2000; Riele, 2004; Lawton et al, 2004; Hernandez-Martinez et al, 2011).

Focus Group 3 involved the least amount of discussion. They made very little reference to the content of the categories and the comments made on the post-it notes other than the first question. Their decisions were then based solely on the number of votes given. They were the only group to include three categories in a response. Although not considered important by the group, two participants

commented on recognising that they were becoming more responsible and more independent within their studies (Bourdieu, 1988; Bauman, 2002; Lawton et al. 2004; Williams et al, 2008).

A constant comparative method was then used to analyse the responses. Comments were compared, coded and categorised in a systematic way and then compared further to identify groups of responses based on the themes emerging from the focus group discussions. These were grouped based on expectations, positive factors and negative factors when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. There were considerable differences between the emerging themes from the group discussions and the initial meta-planning activity.

The results from the meta-planning and focus group discussions will be considered further in the discussion in Chapter 5.

Qualitative data gathered from Interviews

Eight participants took part in individual interviews using a semi-structured interview method. Participants completed an informed consent form and to maintain anonymity and confidentiality participants' names were not used and participants were referred to in the transcripts by number/letter only. Although a semi-structured interview method was used there were some identical questions asked and others that were similar in nature, whilst other questions remained individual for each participant. Initial questions were asked to make the participants more at ease then questioning became more probing to elicit information from each participant.

Interview contents were transcribed and given to each participant to read and make any further comments or alterations for material they felt inaccurate. There was a substantial amount of information obtained from the data which took a considerable time to analyse. Thematic analysis was used where participant's comments were grouped, coded and categorised. Emerging themes were recorded and categorised in terms of: goals or expectations when moving from GCSE to A

Level studies; negative factors or barriers when moving from GCSE to A Level studies; and positive, beneficial factors when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. (see Appendix 9 for sample interview transcripts).

For one participant (Participant1D) comments were positive and negative in nature but also provided evidence of a young learner maturing and learning from his mistakes. He has originally failed all of his subjects in Year 12 (AS Level) but had been permitted to re-sit the year. On reflection, he was able to identify some of his errors and end with a positive goal. Looking at just a few of his comments:

Researcher: Is there anything you would like to change perhaps as you started Year 12?

“Yes, I think students should be made far more aware of the amount of work they will have to do. It seemed great that you went down from 9-10 subjects and GCSE to only 3-4 subjects at A Level but no one really told you how hard it would be. Well actually I suppose they did. All the teachers said the work would be hard but I just did not listen to them. Also, free periods people need to know to use them for work right from the start. It’s great to be able to do your homework and catch up with work from lessons in your free periods, but when you start you think they are great just to hang out with your mates”.

Researcher: Thank you that is really useful. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your experience in sixth form so far?

“It’s just that people should take it more seriously. I’m lucky because I have had a second chance it was my own fault I failed last year because I mucked around. I don’t really know what I would have done if I had not been allowed to re-do the year. There are quite a lot of us that have had to re-sit the year. It’s not bad teachers or anything like that it’s just that we mucked around. We all felt GCSE’s were really easy, none of my mates did any revision and we all got into sixth form. Now we need to actually work this year so we can pass the exams. It’s annoying because some of my mates are now in Year 13 and I am a year behind.

They are still mates and we still hang out but when they have finished and gone to university I will still be here.

Researcher: Do you think you are responsible for your own learning?

“Yeah. I messed up, I’m the only one responsible for failing last year and it’s my responsibility to make sure I do the work this year to get into Year 13. I suppose it’s made me grow up a bit be more mature and less like a kid. I can still hang out with my mates we still go out and still play football all the time but now I know I have to do my work as well”.

Researcher: What do you want to do when you finish sixth form?

“Go to university and study sport or sport physiotherapy that sort of thing”.

Most of the discourse provided by this participant considered transitional difficulties relating to internal factors relating to institutional criteria arising from the educational provision within the sixth form. Although friendships and related activities such as playing football are also external factors relating to events outside the educational establishment. For another participant (Participant E) situations appear to be far more difficult with external factors having a greater impact on transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Looking at some of the questions and responses provide:

Researchers: How do you feel you are getting on with the subjects you are doing at A level?

“I would say ok but some of my teachers would not agree”.

Researcher: Why do you think that is?

“Because I am trying really hard. I do most of the work in the lessons but I don’t suppose I do all that much out of lessons, I don’t do much revision or homework so some teachers think I am lazy”.

Researcher: Why do you not do much homework?

“Because I don’t have time when I get home. It’s like I have so much to do when I get home and I don’t get home till late then I have everything else to do at home so I don’t get any work done”.

Researcher: Why do you get home late?

“Because I have to wait on my dad to give me a lift home. He does not finish work till late then he picks me up on the way home”.

Researcher: What do you do when you get home?

“I have to sort out my brother and sort out dinner if it’s not been made or if it’s been forgotten and do some tidying up and washing if needed”.

Researcher: So, you help out a lot at home, that’s good.

“I don’t have any choice; my dad gets cross if the house is a mess and my mum doesn’t do much some days. It’s like I have to do everything when I get home”.

Researcher: Are you a Carer?

“Yes, I am my mum’s main carer and I have to help sort out my younger brother otherwise he would never be ready for school with his clothes and bag and stuff”.

Researcher: Are your teachers aware you are a Carer?

“No. I don’t want them to know”.

Researcher: Thank you for sharing that. Are you happy to continue with the interview or would you prefer to stop?

“No, it’s ok to go on”.

Further comments later in the interview with Participant E include:

Researcher: You mentioned you feel there is a lot of pressure would you like to explain that a bit more?

“Well I get very stressed, it’s like really hard at home sometimes and I really don’t have the time to do everything. Sometimes I get really stressed and cry a lot. Some teachers don’t do anything when you do not do the homework and others get really cross. But I try as much as I can”.

Researcher: What do you hope to do when you finish sixth form?

“I don’t really know. I would love to go to university but I don’t think my parents will let me. My brother will probably be allowed to go if he wants when he is older but I probably won’t be allowed to go”.

These responses illustrate just some of the difficulties faced by this participant, many the result of family responsibilities, external factors, all of which were having a considerable negative impact not only on the transition from GCSE to A Level studies but in relation to learning in general. It should be noted that there were a lot of comments made within the interviews of a personal nature including family difficulties and mental health issues. Although these are very important in

terms of transitional difficulties, it was decided not to describe these within this current research to maintain anonymity and confidentiality (see Chapter 5 - Discussion for further comments).

Chapter summary

This chapter focused on the results of data gathered using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) with consecutive phases to gain a better understanding of the research problem or questions raised. As proposed by Creswell et al. (2003) the quantitative phase was undertaken first followed by the qualitative phase, where the quantitative data and analysis provided a general understanding of the research problem which would then be refined by exploring participants' views in more depth within the qualitative phase. Quantitative data were initially gathered from questionnaire responses, qualitative data were then gathered from questionnaires using open questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from focus groups through meta-planning activities and group discussions and finally qualitative data were gathered from a small number of individual interviews.

The quantitative data provided from the Likert type scale from responses on the questionnaire were analysed using complex chi squared inferential statistical analysis. The qualitative data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) to identify expectations, positive and negative factors relating to the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Some areas of similarity and contradiction have been found together with comments which have not been mutually exclusive between groups or themes within the analysis. These will be considered further in the discussion in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

Introduction

The previous chapter provides results of data gathered using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from questionnaires, focus group meta-planning activities and individual interviews. Responses were analysed using Chi Squared inferential statistical analysis for quantitative data and a constant comparative method for qualitative data. Data highlights both internal factors and external factors that appear to have an effect on participant transition when progressing from GCSE to A Level studies.

This chapter focuses on integration of the results gathered using quantitative and qualitative methods, identifying and discussing the themes that emerged from the data and how these can relate to the core theoretical concepts introduced within this thesis.

The chapter will discuss 2 main aspects:

- Integrating results from the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research
- The results in relation to the literature review and main theoretical concepts

Integrating results from quantitative and qualitative phases of the research

Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using a model of mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006). Although there are arguments for and against the use of mixed-methods research Creswell et al. (2003) suggested that mixed-methods approaches convey a sense of rigour of the research and help clarify the nature of the research. This view was supported by Kanbur (2005) suggesting that quantitative and qualitative research can jointly contribute to inquiry findings through examination, explanation, confirming, refuting and/or enriching information from one approach to another.

In criticising mixed-methods research Bryman (2006) found that researchers often fail to integrate the findings from quantitative and qualitative data. This subsection, therefore, draws on the findings from the research and integrates the findings using quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, focus group meta-planning activities, focus group discussions and individual interviews.

There were several dominant themes that emerged from the questionnaires, focus group meta-planning activities and discussions, and from the small number of individual interviews conducted. Many of the themes identified within the data resonate with the literature discussed previously in Chapter 2. Comments were both positive and negative in nature but nonetheless provided in-depth rich data and thick description (Geertz, 1973). Findings from interviews were integrated with the findings from the quantitative and qualitative data provided by questionnaires and focus groups. Focus group discussions enabled participants to reflect on the meta-planning activities through expressed views and opinions relating to categories established within the activities. Some participants within the groups were more persuasive with their views and gave justification for their comments. Increasingly participants changed their minds on what was more important and following discussion did not always agree on the categories and votes originally given. their decisions of importance were reached after shared discourse.

The mixed-methods approach was used for the purpose of gaining greater understanding of the transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies and to see whether the combination of mixed methods can complement each other to allow for a more robust analysis of the findings (Morse, 1991; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Creswell et al. 2003; Creswell, 2005; Ivankova et al. 2006).

Question 1 on the initial questionnaire asked ‘How do you feel you have coped with the transition (shift/changes) from GCSE studies to A Level studies?’ Results showed that 80% of participants felt that had coped very badly or not that well compared to 20% suggesting they had coped OK, quite well or very well. These results were also reflected in the data gathered from the

questionnaire providing qualitative data where comments included ‘very difficult to cope’ ‘struggled’ and ‘harder than anticipated’. Further agreement was also shown in the focus group discussions identifying ‘difficult in coping’. This means that the majority of participants identified that they had problems coping with the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. These participant comments support the views of Galton et al. (2000); Winter (2001), Lawton et al. (2004) and Riele (2004) identifying that difficulties in adjustment may lead to disengagement in learning. McQueen (2009) also emphasises the importance of integration from a sociological approach that aids the initial transitions.

The results also suggest that the majority of participants do not yet appear to have developed internalised schemas that would enable them to cope more effectively with the shift from GCSE to A Level studies. As highlighted by Bourdieu (1986) individuals need to establish mental structures through which they can then cope with the social world (*habitus*).

There was one contradictory comment with one participant indicating ‘nothing has changed’. This could have been a comment to explore further. Did the participant feel they were coping well just as they had coped at GCSE or did it suggest that they may have had difficulties coping at GCSE which now continued into A Level studies?

Question 2 asked ‘How supportive do you feel new teachers have been in your transition from GCSE to A Level Studies?’ Quantitative responses indicated that 20% of participants felt they had not been supported by their new teachers compared to 80% that felt support was OK, quite a lot or a considerable amount. There were contradictory comments to the support given by teachers, for example, within the responses to the second questionnaire producing qualitative data comments were both positive ‘support from teachers/family/friends’ and negative ‘new teachers were not being supportive’. Similarly, with the focus group meta-planning activities ‘support’ was included as a positive factor but ‘support’ was also considered as a negative factor.

However, it should be noted that the focus group results (see Tables 13, 14 and 15) indicate ‘support’ in terms of expectations, positive factors and negative factors when moving from GCSE to A Level studies, there is no breakdown in the

results as to whether this support is from teachers or family, friends, peers and so forth. From the interviews, there are also conflicting findings with positive factors including 'teachers giving extra help' and 'some teachers not marking work or giving feedback'. The findings identify that more participants feel teachers were supportive compared to the number of participants that felt teachers were not supportive. The findings resonate with the view of earlier literature into the importance of support in all stages of education (Field, 2000; Wilcox et al. 2005)

The research findings support the views of McQueen (2009) in acknowledging the need for more involvement and staff input into relationships with, or support for students. Castenheira et al. (2007) also emphasise the need to develop a sense of identity and belonging through interaction with others. The current research findings suggest that many of the participants (80%) felt they were supported by their new subject teachers and through reciprocity are more likely to interact with and support others.

However, there is no direct evidence from the results that the support or lack of support had a direct relationship to transitional difficulties experienced by learners when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Question 3 asked 'How difficult have you found the workload when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?' 85% of participants found the workload considerable difficult or quite hard. These views were also supported in the qualitative data from questionnaires where comments included 'far more work than expected' and 'the amount of work' being negative factors. Similar comments were also made within the focus groups including 'huge workload' being considered a negative factor. However, not all participants were in agreement with one comment that 'doing less subjects make it easier to cope with' and another commenting 'being able to drop one subject helped get back on track with other subjects'. This means that the workload was considered as a difficulty or problem in making a successful transition from GCSE to A Level studies for many of the participants.

These findings resonate with previous literature including Williams et al. (2008) who also identify transitional difficulties where the problems are associated with

the need to 'step up' to the demands and experiences and increased autonomy of the expected workload.

Question 4 asked 'How much effort do you feel you have put into your A Level studies compared to GCSE studies?' 66.25% indicating they made little or no effort with their A Level studies. These responses were also reflected in the qualitative data gathered from questionnaires including 'not as much as I should' and from the focus group discussions 'making very little effort to work' and from the interviews 'making no effort', 'messing around and doing no work'.

However, effort was not always perceived in a negative way. 12.5% of the questionnaire responses indicated that they felt they were putting in a considerable amount of effort. This was again reflected in some of the focus group feedback including 'a fair amount of effort', 'more effort for independent study' and 'more effort in subjects to study at university'. These findings show mixed response in the amount of effort participants feel that have put into their A Level studies compared to GCSE's and means that lack of effort can contribute to transitional difficulties.

These findings appear to fit into the problems associated with transition identified by Lawton et al. (2004) and Williams et al. (2008) identifying lack of independent learning skills and Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) arguing the need for individuals to be more responsible for their learning.

There were two comments that stand out from the others 'about the same as GCSE' and 'about the same amount of effort as GCSE and that's reflected in my current grades'. These could have been responses to explore further, does it indicate that the participants had done well at GCSE and were, therefore, making just as much effort at A Level? Or does it suggest that they made little effort at GCSE and are currently making little effort at A Level which appears to be evidence in the current grades – are these grades high grades or are they low grades? This is not obvious from the participant comments made.

Question 5 asked 'Have you made good use of your private study time (free periods) to do work outside lessons?' 68.75% of participants indicated that they did not use free periods effectively or suggested they made very little effective

use of this time. These responses were reflected in the qualitative data with negative comments including ‘not using free periods to study’ and were also reflected in the focus group discussions with comments including ‘not doing work in free periods’. There were limited contradictory findings from some of the data, for example, participant responses from questionnaires also included positive responses for the use of free periods (private study time). Although the data shows that many participants do not make effective use of private study time (free periods) there is no direct evidence that this in itself has a negative impact on transition from GCSE to A Level studies.

Some participant comments do, however, resonate with earlier research findings in the lack of self-discipline, poor organisation, lack of autonomy and inability to meet the demands of work, and the need for learners to take more responsibility for their learning which have been identified as transitional difficulties (Lawton et al. 2004; Williams et al. 2008; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011).

Question 6 asked ‘Have you experienced any external factors (i.e. events outside the sixth form) that have caused you difficulties in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies e.g. home life/family life?’ 62.5% of participants indicated that they did feel there were external factors that had caused difficulties in transition. Qualitative data from the questionnaire provides an element of support for these findings with negative comments in relation to travel, transport, family bereavement, and part-time work. Findings were also supported from the focus group meta-planning activities where external factors included social life, family pressure, family responsibilities, and sport activities. Further support was also provided from the focus group discussions where external factors included part-time work taking up too much study time, unrealistic parental expectations, pressure from peers to have more social life than study time. Similar findings were also evident from the interviews commenting on pressure from home, being a carer for family members, sport activities outside school, and failing to live up to parental expectations. The findings mean that for a majority of the participants there are external factors that cause transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Question 7 asked ‘Has your part-time job had a negative impact on your transition from GCSE to A Level studies?’ 10 participants indicated that they did not have a part-time job. From the remaining participants, the questionnaire responses indicated that 62.5% of participants did feel that their part-time work had a negative impact. These views were also evident from the qualitative data from the questionnaire indicating ‘part-time job leaves less time to study’ and again similar responses were shown in the focus group discussions with comments also referring to ‘part-time work taking up too much study time’. These views were also supported in the individual interviews where comments included ‘part-time work interfering with study time’. This evidence means that for those students with part-time jobs this does have a direct negative impact on the successful transition from GCSE to A Level studies as a result of less time for learning.

In the focus group discussions and interviews it was noted that participants commented that on average those with part-time employment work on average 18-28 hours per week with the number of hours increasing in holiday periods. The recommended number of hours’ part-time work within the student information provided by the Sixth Form is a maximum of 8-10 hours per week.

Question 8 asked ‘Have new friendship groups caused you any difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?’ Results show that 32.5% of participants that completed the initial questionnaire felt that new friendship groups had caused difficulties but a greater proportion of 64.5% felt these had not caused difficulties. The qualitative data from the second questionnaire also had mixed responses, some participants indicating that ‘making new friends’ and ‘meeting new people’ were positive aspects but for others ‘new people’ and ‘pressure of leading active social life has caused problems’. Again, within the focus group meta-planning activities ‘friendships’ and ‘social life’ were considered as part of the expectations when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. Also within the meta-planning activities ‘friends’ and ‘getting on with people’ were considered positive factors, but ‘social life’ was also considered a negative factor. Similarly, from the focus group discussions ‘pressure from peers

to have more social life that study time' was considered a negative factor. Finally, from the individual interviews more negative comments were made including 'not making any new friends'.

Within the comments made the categories of friendship groups and social life were not mutually exclusive. For many participants, new friendships were considered an expectation and positive factor but for a smaller number of participants these were considered in a more negative factor. The results mean that for some participant's new friendship groups and social life were identified as contributing to difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

The findings from the current research are reflected in the earlier views of the importance of friendships (Bourdieu, 1986; Taylor, 1989; Moos, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Field, 2003). More recent evidence from Wilcox et al. (2005) suggesting that the emotional support provided by friends and family can have a 'buffering' effect against the stressful experiences of being alone in new situations. Guiffrida (2004) identify negative effects of friendships describing friendships in terms of stress in transition that can arise from the feeling of being caught between two worlds, that is, between old friendships and new friendships formed in new learning environments.

Question 9 asked 'How stressful did you find the transition from GCSE to A Level studies?' 67.5% of responses to the initial questionnaire indicated that they found the transition extremely or quite stressful. These responses were also supported from the qualitative data gathered from the second questionnaire where comments included 'stress' and 'pressure to do well'. Stress was also considered the second highest negative factor from the focus group activities and received the most comments from the focus group discussions. Similar findings emerged from the individual interviews where emphasis was placed on 'continually stressful'. The integration of results from quantitative and qualitative data mean that stress was a major factor in transitional difficulties identified by learner when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. The term 'stress' was not specifically defined within the research questions used and there was no measure of stress or stress scale used for participants to indicate their level of stress yet it was explicitly identified as a negative factor for many of the participants. Stress has

been identified in earlier research (Galton et al, 2000; Coleman, 2007) however, the nature of the questioning used in the current research does not explain whether it was transitional difficulties that were the cause of stress or other causal factors that resulted in stress.

Question 10 asked ‘Do you feel you were sufficiently prepared for the increased level of work when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?’

72.5% of participants to the initial questionnaire stated that they were not sufficiently prepared for the increase in work level. These views were also reflected in the qualitative data, for example, ‘harder than anticipated’, ‘hard to adjust’ and ‘not prepared for so much independent learning’. Other negative comments included ‘the amount of work’, ‘having to do work all of the time’ and ‘far more detail needed even for low mark questions’.

Independent learning featured in many of the responses including ‘was not prepared for so much independent learning’ (from questionnaires), ‘not enough preparation for independent learning’ (from questionnaires), ‘did not think there would be so much work to do independently so not much done’ (from questionnaires). ‘Having to work independently’ had the highest number of votes for negative factors from the focus group activities, and ‘having to research and find information for yourself’ was identified within the focus group discussions. ‘Having to work independently’ was also identified as a negative factor within the individual interviews.

There was one very negative participant within the individual interviews commenting ‘I don’t want to be here. I don’t care if I fail everything. There is no point trying’. These comments reflect earlier research that identified difficulties in adjustment as a problem of transition (Riele, 2004; Galton et al. 2007) where difficulties in adjustment may lead to disengagement in learning which can have subsequent negative impact on future life chances, for example in terms of successful entry into the workforce.

In contrast one participant indicated with a positive response identifying that ‘more effort was made for independent study’. Further contrasting views were

provided by 27.5% of participants from the initial questionnaire indicated they were partially or fully prepared for the increased level of work.

From the integrated results the majority of responses identified that participants were not sufficiently prepared for the increased level of work and this was a negative factor in the transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Question 11 asked ‘Did you do any summer work for your new A Level courses e.g. research, reading the syllabus etc.?’ The majority of participants 81.25% indicated that they had not done any or very little work over the summer for their new A Level courses. There was one positive comment from the qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire indicating ‘pre-course work over the summer holiday was beneficial/helpful’. Summer work did not feature in any of the responses from the focus group meta-planning activities, group discussions or individual interviews.

These reflect the view of Bloomer (1999) who proposed that some young people make post-16 decisions without critical engagement in pre-course decision making and Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) arguing the need for individuals to be more responsible for their learning.

It should be noted that setting pre-course work for new students to complete over the summer holiday was a relatively new initiative and was not provided by all departments for all subjects at A Level. Not all new learners attended open days or induction days and may not have received pre-course work in advance of commencing the course. It would be difficult to measure how much, if any, effect this had on the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Although it could be inferred from the work set that this would give learners at the very least an introduction to some of their new subjects.

Additional findings

There was a significant amount of responses given that did not fall directly into any of the above questions, yet they were of considerable importance to the

research. For example, there were many comments, both positive and negative, relating to being more responsible or in control of their own work; family pressures and family responsibilities; unrealistic expectations and unrealistic target grades; travel and transport; and lack of motivation.

Lack of motivation was identified within the qualitative data from questionnaires and focus group discussion. Similar views were also identified by Gallagher-Brett and Canning (2011) suggesting that difficulties in transition are likely to occur where there is a lack of interest and lack of motivation. The current research findings also resonate with Crabtree et al. (2007) suggesting that students may feel more uncertain and insecure, there may be erosion in confidence, and reduced motivation which may lead to increase in decisions to withdraw from courses.

In contrast, not all participants within the current research identified with lack of motivation. Within the qualitative data from questionnaires some participants indicate 'being more motivated' as a positive factor. These findings resonate with Miles et al. (2002) and Beach (2003) advocating more positive definitions of transition in terms of acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Travel and transport were identified within the qualitative data from questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews. Many participants rely on public transport to get to and from the Sixth Form. Although on the outskirts of a city centre participants comment that travel was time consuming and public transport often unreliable, congested and delays were frequent. Although travel and transport were not specific questions within the current research topic they could nonetheless be considered in terms of possible external factors affecting transition.

Unrealistic expectations and unrealistic target grades were also identified by several participants within the focus group discussions and interviews with comments including 'unrealistic targets make you feel you will always fail' and 'not living up to teachers and parent's expectations'. Participants commented that parents had unrealistic expectations of their abilities at A Level, part of which they felt was a result of the targets set.

Within the Sixth Form where the research was undertaken, all students complete an ALIS test within the first week of starting A Level courses. The ALIS test (Advanced Level Information System) is a computer-based test which ‘gives teachers the reliable data they need to predict exam outcomes’. However, data from the ALIS test only predicts A – D grades and carries the caveat that there may be error of 25% in either direction. Targets for each student and their individual subjects is then based on the results of the ALIS test and their average GCSE score, the target set is then one grade higher. As one participant explained further, his GCSE results were 4 C grades and 5 D grades, but he did well on the computerised ALIS test and with one grade added he was predicted an A grade in all of his subjects at A Level. Clearly, he felt this was an unrealistic target and for each of his progress reports throughout the year he was underachieving compared to his target grade. Criticisms were also made by subject teachers in the use of ALIS as a predictor, for example, in one subject, for three consecutive years ALIS results predicted B grades for all students which then gave each student a target A grade at A Level.

Participants felt they were ‘destined to fail’ even before they started the courses because of the unrealistic targets that were set and as such caused difficulties in the transition to A Level studies. In contrast, there were just three participants who contradicted this view and felt that the target grades gave them something higher to aim for and were then seen as beneficial. In earlier work Gallagher-Brett and Canning (2011) and Department for Education (2012) raised concerns regarding underachievement of learners’ attainment between GCSE grades and subsequent A Levels yet within the current research it would seem that unrealistic targets set by the sixth form would have a serious negative impact for the majority of participants both in terms of motivation and achievement in examinations. Research findings could also be loosely linked to Bourdieu (1986) and the concept of *habitus* where individuals learn to want what conditions make possible for them, but not aspire to what is not available to them.

Within the qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews several participants commented on family responsibilities these included working in the family business in the evenings and at weekends or being responsible for younger siblings. 11 participants commented that they were

'young carers' for family members with a variety of health-related issues. No questions were specifically asked relating to young carers and this would be an area for further investigation and exploration. The time and responsibilities of young carers does have a considerable impact on their learning including transition to A Level studies. As one participant commented she "did not have time for socialising with her new friends because she was expected to look after her mother as her main carer". This learner gave consent for this to be shared and commented further that "she did not want teachers to know about this because it was private" yet at the same time she was also "grateful" that she had been given the opportunity to try and study A Levels. These findings can be linked to situational barriers identified by Gorard and Smith (2007) identifying that the extent to which young people participant in learning opportunities depends on the actions of the individuals. Aldridge and Becker (2003) also identify with educational attendance and attainment of young carers and the need for additional transitional support.

One further theme that emerged from the research but which is not explicitly raised within the questionnaires or focus group activities is the effects of mental health issues with young people. This was considered a very sensitive area but one in which 6 participants went on to discuss. 2 of these discussions took place within the interviews and a further 4 were discussions that took place at the specific request of the participants. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity direct quotes were not used as the specific request of participants. However, they did want to share information as they thought it was crucially important and for each of them their illness had a considerable impact on their transition from GCSE to A Levels. 5 out of the 6 participants expressed positive appreciation that some staff within the sixth form were more aware of mental health issues and how these impacted on young lives. They also commented that they felt misunderstood or ignored in earlier school years. For some of these learners they had to make adjustments to their lives coping with diagnosis and medication, mixed with feelings of isolation, lack of understanding and negative labelling associated with mental health issues. They also identified lack of friendship groups and a fear of bullying, though none disclosed that they had been bullied, it

was the fear or anticipation of bullying that caused additional stress and anxiety and for these particular participants added greatly to their transitional difficulties.

The negative impact of mental health issues has been identified in relation to transitional difficulties within education including Zeedyk et al. (2003) focusing on the negative output on pupil well-being, Coleman (2007) identifying the major psychological readjustment needed, and Gulliver et al. (2010) commenting on the greater need to tackle mental health problems of young people earlier in life to improve educational attainment, employment opportunities and physical health.

The area of mental health issues was not specifically questioned within the current project but participants explicitly stated these issues caused difficulties in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies and is clearly an important area for further research.

Discussing the results in relation to the literature review

Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified research within sixth form colleges as an under-researched sector of educational provision. They identified two significant gaps in the literature: firstly, they suggest there are few studies on post-compulsory education and none on sixth form colleges. Secondly, they identify a dislocation between research studies of institutional culture and practices and new academic interests in learning which fail to identify and address possible issues relating to transitional difficulties faced by some learners. This current research aimed to add, albeit in a very small way, to research specifically within sixth form education focusing on transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies.

Sociological explanations of transition including Giddens (1991) identify the need for individuals to have a sense of ontological security where continuity and order see the individual through transition and crises and circumstances of high risk. Bourdieu (1986) describes *habitus* as a combination of free will and determinism establishing mental structures through which individuals cope with the social world. Bourdieu (1986) also introduces the concepts of field and capital

emphasising the need for a reflective society where individuals learn to want what conditions make possible for them, but not to aspire to what is not available to them. Field (2003) provide an alternative to the social capital theory of Bourdieu, emphasising the importance of interaction which enables buildings of communities within which individuals develop a sense of belonging based on the theory 'relationships matter' and the concept that 'social networks are valuable assets'.

Transition can be considered in both positive and negative perspectives, Williams et al. (2008) explain transition as a key moment when trouble with the 'step up' in demand was experienced at the same time as social, intellectual and emotional challenges were being imposed (by the need to re-construct a peer group, by the increases in autonomy of the expected higher level work and by the demands to be 'grown up'). In contrast Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) suggest transition can be seen in a more positive discourse, one of reported challenge, growth and achievement. Transition is not seen as an obstacle but as an opportunity to develop a new identity in which the person see themselves develop due to the distinct social and academic demands that the new institution creates where the chance to become a new person can be explored by many learners.

Positive aspects of transition were evident in the comment made by one participant in the qualitative data gathered from questionnaires when answering Question 3 relating to problems/barriers/difficulties in transition from GCSE to A Level studies the response given 'nothing – in fact it has caused advantages in my life'. Themes emerging from the focus group meta-planning activities also identified positive aspects of transition within the category identified by participants relating to ambitions/opportunities/goals. Similarly, positive aspects of transition were identified as 'feeling more responsible' and 'feeling more independent'.

Feeling more responsible and independent were part of the threads or themes emanating from the data. At times these were seen in a positive perspective, for example, in some of the interview comments:

Interview 1C – "I always work hard, and am well organised with my work and plan things carefully, I am good at time management because I plan carefully, I

do my work straight away that helps keep my up to date and I don't fall behind with any of my work".

Interview 1A – "Now you need to be far more independent and learn to find out things for yourself from a lot of different resources".

Questionnaire Participant 15 – "I feel more independent, more like an adult, we are all treated with the same respect. Also, A Level studies give you more of an in-depth knowledge about the subject. Makes you understand more".

But for other participants there were negative comments:

Interview 1G – "It's like you suddenly have to do your own research but no one actually bothers to explain how you need to do the research when you do not just copy and paste from the internet. You can get loads on the internet even essay answers but teachers don't accept it because it's not your work. How can we find out information when no one teaches us how to? One teacher got cross because we would not look for information in a text book, we kept shouting out what page will it be on, then the teacher realised that we did not know how to find the information because at GCSE we had always been told page numbers and stuff. But she then stopped the lesson and showed us how to find things in text books and how to use the exam board website to find useful information. That really helped but other teachers did not bother".

These comments, both positive and negative, resonate with earlier research findings. Williams et al. (2008) consider methods of progression through transition focusing on positive progression and outcome, where transition is seen as a challenge, achievable through autonomy and self-reflection and where growth can be achieved through positive approaches to study and work. In contrast, Lawton et al. (2004) identified lack of independent learning, lack of skill, poor time-management, self-discipline, organisation and difficulty in taking the initiative as contributory factors in transitional difficulties between GCSE and A Levels.

Williams et al. (2008) use case study evidence to show that many students are not prepared to be autonomous learners. These findings support earlier research by Drew (2001) identifying that students need to learn how to manage large

quantities of independent learning, Lawton et al (2004) identifying lack of independent learning and Green (2005) suggesting that transition is affected by the need to develop independent study skills. Within the current research findings, the lack of autonomous learning and ‘not being prepared for independent learning’ and ‘having to work independently’ were found within the results from the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews.

Galton et al. (2002) and Riele (2004) identify difficulties in adjustment which may lead to disengagement in learning. These views were evident in the current research findings, for example, ‘distractions’ were identified as negative factors within the focus group meta-planning, ‘making no effort’, ‘having to re-sit the year’ and ‘messaging around and doing no work’ from interview comments. These comments may result from disengagement in learning but there is no direct evidence from the comments made that they were the result of difficulties in adjustment.

Williams et al. (2008) focus on transition and transitional practices from the subjective view of participants. From participant’s narrative Williams et al. (2008) suggest learners need to re-construct peer groups, become more autonomous learners, adjust to increased workload and to develop identity-in-practice. The authors argue that transition can be seen in a more positive discourse of challenge, growth and achievement. Within the findings of this current research there were mixed views. Some participants indicated that ‘becoming more independent’, ‘taking responsibility and control’, and ‘helping improve confidence’ were all positive factors in relation to transition. In contrast responses to Question 3 indicate that 85% of participants found the workload at A Level considerably difficult. These views were also supported in the earlier literature by Office for Standards in Education (2001) indicating that students studying for revised A Level qualifications had fewer opportunities for independent work, and that a heavy workload was also considered a contributing factor.

Friendships, identity and social life were identified as further themes from the data. Forming and maintaining friendships help establish social identity and this was evident in the results of the current research from questionnaires, focus

groups and interviews and for many participant's new friendship groups were seen as beneficial.

Interview 1E – “Mainly chatting with friends and having something to eat. I don't always have time for breakfast so I often eat at break-time. We sometimes share our food and that's nice because it's just between your own group of friends”.

Questionnaire 29 – “It has been like creating a new identity. I came from a different school in a different town and no one knows me here. No one knows my background and I can just build my own new identity. My new friends don't need to know my past or my family”.

Focus Group 1 – “We put loads of comments for friends and support but I suppose they are like the same as getting on with people, why did we not put them all together?”

These comments lend support to earlier literature including Field (2003) emphasising the importance of interaction which enables building of communities within which individuals commit themselves to each other and to develop a sense of belonging. Wilcox et al. (2005) identifying that emotional support provided by friends and family can have a 'buffering' effect against stressful experiences of being alone in new situations. McQueen (2009) also emphasised the importance of integration for a sociological approach that aid the initial transition.

Bauman (2002) considers how identity is shaped through experience, where identity is not abstract but is based on the constructed patterns and discourse of everyday life which are constructed and reconstructed across time and events. Castanheira et al. (2007) describe pupil identities in school that are not given, but formulated in, and through, the developing discourse, practices and methods of structuring interactions. This view is supported by Williams et al. (2008) proposing the need for 'identity in practice' to help understand how subjective engagement in practice may constitute learners' formation of social identity.

In contrast, not all of the research findings included 'new friendships' in a positive light. Quantitative data found that 32.5% of participants found that new

friendship groups had caused difficulties in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies.

Interview 1J – “On the whole I don’t think my friends give me a great deal of support, we just moan about things, no one like tries to help you do your work or tries to explain if you don’t understand”.

Interview 1C – “Everything is going well except perhaps I have not made any new friends”.

These negative views of friendship support earlier findings of Guiffrida (2004) describing friendships in terms of a stress in transition that can arise from the feeling of being caught between two worlds, that is, between old friendships and new friendships formed in new learning environments.

Gorard and Smith (2007) discuss human capital theory which in turn can be identified in terms of barriers to participation. Individuals are deemed to participate in learning according to their calculations of the most economic benefit to be derived from education or training. Gorard and Smith (2007) identify different types of barriers to participation including: institutional barriers created by structures of available opportunities, dispositional barriers in the form of individuals’ motives and attitudes to learning and situational barriers based on life and lifestyle of the learner are often dependent on the relative cost of education.

Findings from the current research reflect some aspects of situational barriers, for example, one participant included ‘textbooks’ as an expectation within the focus group, this was the expectation that textbooks would be provided at A Level as they had been for GCSE, however, this was not the case and learners had to purchase their own books. For some learners, this caused financial difficulties. Human capital theory was not included in the questions within this current research, however, for many the relative cost of education can also be considered in terms of the number of learners that have part-time paid employment whilst being in full-time education. Only 10 of the participants (6.8%) in the research did not have part-time employment. 62.5% of the participants with part-time jobs felt this had a negative impact on their transition from GCSE to A Level studies,

these views were also reflected in the focus group discussions and interviews with comments including ‘part-time work taking up too much study time’ and ‘part-time work interfering with study time’. As one response comments:

Questionnaire 35 – “Also I have a part time -job, they keep making me do more hours, I was only doing about 12 a week when I started now that’s up to about 18 hours a week. They put up my hours over the holiday but would not take them back down when I came back to college after the holiday”.

Stress was identified as a further thread or theme emerging from the data.

Interview 1A – “I am really bad with stress. I was the same in GCSE’s. I got stressed all the time. Teachers and my parents kept telling me to relax more but I put extra pressure on myself.”

Interview 1C – “Yes, stress really is a problem for me. I probably put myself under so much pressure to do well, I have to work all the time at college and at home. I try to do at least 4 hours each night and lots at the weekend. I don’t have time for anything else other than studies because I need to do really well... I don’t cope with stress well. I ended up at the doctors, I cried a lot got ill and had to go on medication. But it was ok in the end. That’s why I am working so hard now. To keep on top of my work then I won’t get so stressed if I don’t fall behind... after I was off ill but only because I was ill, then I had a lot of catching up to do and that sort of made me more stressed. It’s like you have to catch up with missed work but still continue doing the current work in lessons and more homework and the homework you have missed”.

Evangelou et al. (2005) identified that transition causes difficulties in social adjustment including: stressful transition; the need for adequate social support; and friendship networks for essential coping. Although their research related to primary school to secondary school transition their findings still appear to be relevant in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. For example, 67.5% of participants in the current research stated that they felt the transition was extremely stressful or quite stressful. These views were also included in the qualitative data from questionnaires and focus group activities.

Pupil well-being and psychological distress have been identified as issues of concern relating to transition at key educational stages. The findings from research in the transition from primary school to secondary school by Zeedyk et al. (2003) identified that poorer transition leads to lower educational achievement and has a negative input on pupil well-being. These findings would also appear to be relevant in secondary school to post-16 transition as identified by The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2002), Dixon et al. (2006) and Coleman (2007). In longitudinal research West et al. (2010) focused on experiences of transition, predictors of poorer transition and consequences for educational attainment and pupil well-being. The authors found that at age 18-19 and beyond school earlier transitional difficulties were associated with low self-esteem, increased psychological distress and poorer performance in academic qualifications. Earlier views were supported by Gulliver et al. (2010) emphasising the benefits of addressing mental health needs of children and young people.

Within the current research no questions were raised directly relating to learners' well-being, psychological health or mental health issues. However, 6 participants did discuss mental health issues relating to transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Comments included feelings of being misunderstood or ignored in earlier school years, making adjustments following diagnosis, adapting to medication, feelings of isolation, fear of bullying, lack of understanding and negative labelling associated with mental health issues. These views resonate with earlier research findings including Zeedyk et al. (2003), Coleman (2007) and West et al. (2010).

Coleman (2007) also identifies that where young people are both 'young' and 'adult' at the same time they arguably need the most support. Although there were no questions directly relating to this in the current research these views were reflected in the current research findings with 11 participants advising that they were 'young carers' for family members.

Interview IE – "I don't have time for socialising with friends because I am expected to look after my mother as her main carer".

The main threads of themes emanating from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered within this research, for example, independence, autonomous learning,

friendship, identity and stress resonate with earlier literature in Chapter 2. These are issues that continue to be recognised as leading to transitional difficulties in key educational stages including in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies, yet this raises questions as to why so little appears to have been done to address these issues.

Chapter summary

This chapter focuses on the discussion of the findings from the current research. The chapter uses integration of the results from quantitative and qualitative phases of data gathering using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) with consecutive phases to gain a better understanding of the research problem or questions raised.

The discussion then considered the results in relation to the literature review provided earlier in Chapter 2. Participant discourse was used to highlight and identify transitional difficulties perceived by the participants within this current research and to show how the findings resonate with earlier research findings, themes or threads emanating from the data gathered.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Introduction

The previous chapter focuses on discussing integration of results using a mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, interviews and focus group meta-planning activities and individual interviews. The chapter also examines the findings from the research in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

The aim of the final chapter is to draw conclusions from the research findings and identify how these relate to the research questions raised within this thesis. The chapter will discuss 4 main aspects

- The results in relation to the research questions
- The results in relation to professional practice
- Conclusions
- Identifying areas for further possible research

Discussing the results in relation to the research questions

The initial literature review provides insight that led to the development of the three research questions:

1. What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level Studies?
2. What internal factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?
3. What external factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Research findings were drawn from the use of a small-scale case study using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006). The mixed-methods approach included quantitative data gathered from the use of a questionnaire and qualitative data gathered from a questionnaire, focus group meta-planning activities, focus group discussions and a small sample of individual interviews (Davies et al. 2001; Creswell, 2003; Bryman 2004; Kanbur, 2005; Torres, 2006; Greene 2008).

Quantitative data were analysed using a complex chi squared non-parametric inferential statistical test. Qualitative data were analysed using a constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to identify themes emerging from the data. Responses were noted, compared, coded and categorised in a systematic way, compared further and put into responding groups based on the emerging themes.

1. What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level Studies?

Williams et al. (2002) explain transition as a key moment when trouble with the 'step up' in demand was experienced at the same time as social, intellectual and emotional challenges were being imposed (by the need to reconstruct a peer group, by the increases in autonomy of the expected work and by the demands to be 'grown up'). In contrast, Miles et al. (2002) propose an alternative, more positive, definition of transition as a developmental style where young people engage in the acquisition of knowledge and skills inherent to the demands of the life phase to come. Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011) also suggest transition can be seen in a more positive discourse, one of reported challenge, growth and achievement. Transition is not seen as an obstacle but as an opportunity.

There would appear to be no single definition of transition that explains, with any level of accuracy, the experiences of young people when they move from GCSE to A Level studies.

There have been many processes of change or transition that learners experience in various stages of education including from secondary to post-16 education

within sixth form provision (Winter, 2001; Lawton et al. 2004; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011) and from sixth form to university (McQueen, 2009; Barlow 2012). Having gone through many stages of transition before reaching sixth form this raises questions as to why some learners might find it difficult in adjusting from GCSE to A Level studies.

The main research questions focus on identifying what learners themselves considered to be causes of transitional difficulties in post-16 education. 147 participants took part in the current research this being just over 61% of the student population in the sixth form where the research was conducted. Only 1 participant indicated that they had not experienced any transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies and considered transition in a positive discourse. Only 1 participant viewed everything from a negative approach, all other participants had a mixture of positive and negative comments relating to their transitional experiences.

There was a considerable variety in the participants' own views of the causes of transitional difficulties, these were supported by the research findings and resonate with earlier literature. Themes that emerged from the mixed-methods approach were identified as, inter alia, inability to cope; extensive workload; lack of effort; ineffective use of private study periods or non-contact time (known to students as free periods); limited autonomy and lack of responsibility; disengagement and lack of motivation.

Many of the findings can be related to the empirical evidence in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 with some findings providing support for previous research. For example, the participant that did not identify any transitional difficulties had a positive outlook, viewing transition as a positive factor. In comparison, one participant had a totally negative view of transition and their experience within sixth form, this could be related to earlier research that identified difficulties in adjustment as a problem of transition (Riele, 2004; Galton et al. 2007) where difficulties in adjustment may lead to disengagement in learning.

Inability to cope was previously identified by West et al. (2010) where low levels of self-esteem, increased depression and increased anti-social behaviour were identified by participants that had identified earlier transitional difficulties.

Findings from the current research resonate with earlier research, for example, extensive workload was previously considered by Drew (2001) suggesting that students needed instruction to approaches to learning and how to manage large quantities of independent learning. Lack of effort was also discussed by Green (2005) suggesting that learners need to develop independent study skills. Limited autonomy and lack of responsibility were identified in previous literature including Williams et al. (2008) identifying with learner's lack of autonomy in learning and Lawton et al. (2004) identifying transitional difficulties in terms of lack of individual learning, lack of skills, poor time-management, lack of self-discipline and poor organisational skills.

Disengagement in learning and lack of motivation were previously identified in the literature by Galton et al. (2000) and Riele (2004). Morris and Rutt (2005) also suggest that lack of aspiration and lack of motivation were linked to increased concerns about incurring debt. West et al. (2010) also identified difficulty in adjusting to peer and social systems which lead to greater transitional difficulties.

2. What internal factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

Internal factors can be described as anything occurring within the educational provision and educational establishment that could be considered in relation to transitional difficulties for learners moving from GCSE to A Level studies, bounded within the sixth form where the current research was conducted.

From the research findings, various themes emerged many of which resonate with earlier literature including teacher support; feedback and marking of work; identifying methods of improving work; and learning research skills. However, there were both positive and negative comments, for example, some participants

criticised teachers for lack of support whilst other participants considered teacher support to be beneficial and identified methods of improving work.

Friendships provided another theme running throughout the findings from both quantitative and qualitative data. For some participants forming new friendships within the sixth form was fundamentally important yet for others friendships caused problems and for one participant there was evidence of lack of friends within the sixth form. Friendships can be considered as both internal factors and external factors relating to transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies and beyond.

Empirical evidence focuses on both the positive and negative impacts of friendships. For example, evidence from Wilcox et al. (2005) highlight the emotional support provided by friends and family can have a 'buffering' effect against the stressful experiences of being alone in new situations. In contrast Guiffrida (2004) identify negative effects describing friendships in terms of stress in transition that can arise from the feeling of being caught between two worlds, that is, between old friendships and new friendships formed in new learning environments. The findings of the current research appear to resonate with Wilcox et al (2005) and Guiffrida (2004).

3. What external factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

External factors can be described as anything not within the educational provision or the educational establishment itself that are considered in terms of transitional difficulties in the shift from GCSE to A Level studies, for example, social factors, family and home life, employment, friends and relationships.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2002) suggest that changes in young people's educational careers and attitudes to learning were frequently linked to their lives outside formal educational institutions, including friendship groups, student-parent relationships, personal relationships and economic status which had negative influences on their educational success.

Furlong et al. (2006) suggest that youth transitions have become increasingly complex which has led to greater vulnerability to marginalisation and exclusion. From longitudinal studies, Furlong et al. (2006) found that in addition to educational performance, other factors have had an impact on transition including living in deprived areas and parental occupations. Although findings from the current research do not explicitly support the view of 'increasing complex' youth transition, the findings identify both similarities and differences in participant responses highlighting the need to recognise individual differences in participant experiences in the transition from GCSE to Level studies.

The research findings produced a wide variety of external factors not all of which were considered in detail. Some findings related to individual participants, for example, sport, family bereavement and limited ability in English as an additional language. There were, however, other themes emerging from the data which were reflected in the literature including home life with lack of support or pressure from parents; relationships; friendships; part-time employment and family commitments.

There was evidence from the research findings that external factors do have a negative impact in relation to learners' transition from GCSE to A Level studies. One such factor was part-time employment with 62.5% of participants indicating that their part-time employment was causing problems such as reducing the amount of time for study. When probing further into this in the interviews participants justified their paid employment in terms of 'helping to support their family financially', 'to pay for textbooks, stationary and school trips' with only one participant indicating it was 'for their own leisure activities such as going to the cinema'.

Although socio-economic status was not considered within the current research there is evidence to suggest it can have negative implications for transition within key educational stages. Sociological approaches including Beck (1992) and Bloomer (1999) identifying that uncertainty, individuation and risk in the learning career of young people were more evident for those of low socio-economic status and low cultural capital. Mendick (2008) also advocates a clear correlation with socio-economic class and later A Level achievement and outcome.

Discussing the results in relation to professional practice?

Gorard and Cook (2007) emphasis the need for evidence-based policy making and practice based on more real research where the researcher is genuinely trying to find something out. I would hope that the findings from this research have provided small, but perhaps relevant insight into transitional difficulties identified by learners as they progress from GCSE to A Level studies.

The rationale for this research was based on limited existing literature and on personal teaching experiences working within the sixth form where the research was conducted. As Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000) identify research within sixth form colleges is an under-researched sector of educational provision. Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified two significant gaps in the literature; firstly, they suggest there are few studies on post-compulsory education and none on sixth form colleges. Secondly, they identify a dislocation between research studies of institutional culture and practices and new academic interests in learning which fail to identify and address possible issues relating to transitional difficulties faced by some learners.

Research was conducted by myself as an insider on the insider-outsider continuum with some *a priori* knowledge of the participants as learners within the sixth form community.

The research used a model for mixed-methods sequential exploratory design using quantitative and qualitative data gathered from questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews (Creswell et al. 2003; Ivankova et al. 2006; Torres, 2006). The use of mixed-methods research and integration of findings has developed in recent years as a method of educational research (Creswell, 2003; Bryman, 2004; Kanbur, 2005; Greene, 2008). The integration of findings also resonates with the concepts of triangulation (Morse, 1991; Greene et al. 1999; Bryman, 2006) and concepts of crystallisation (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2008). The use of multiple case studies has also been recognised as producing holistic views and enables integration of findings across and between cases as suggested by Yin (1989), Burton (2000) and Creswell (2007).

The main findings show there are a considerable number of participants that find the transition from GCSE to A Level studies difficult for a wide variety of internal and external reasons including difficulty in coping, extensive workload, stress, friendships, support, lack of responsibility and autonomous learning. However, not all of the findings were negative in nature, for some participants the transition was viewed in more positive light in terms of developing new friendships, becoming more independent and having a positive outlook for academic success.

One participant considered the transition from GCSE to A Level studies in a positive discourse with advantages of greater independence and recognising their own potential. This individual participant's views support the earlier more positive definitions and explanations of transition offered by Williams et al. (2008) and Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011).

The findings suggest that there is a need to be able to identify participants (learners) that are finding the transition more difficult and providing extra support. As the reasons for transitional difficulties are varied additional support would need to be targeted at meeting the individual needs of the learners. This could lead to improvement in practice by recognising the need for additional support at an earlier stage through greater discourse with students on an individual one-to-one basis. However, teacher timetables do not take this into consideration and it is often left to teachers who are prepared to undertake extra meetings and discussions outside lesson time, giving additional support when and where they can, often with limited or no follow up. These views were also evident in earlier research, for example, Cook and Leckey (1999) consider a range of issues surrounding transition from A Level to degree level studies. They suggest the widespread belief that in order to ease student transition it is essential that staff have an informed view of the diversity in the backgrounds, needs and aspirations of students they teach. These views were supported by Drew (2001) suggesting that there is an obligation placed on teachers and lecturers to consider the specific transitional needs of students progressing to higher education. This should include introduction to typical approaches to learning, learning how to manage large quantities of independent learning, and developing skills to function within the new environment. Drew (2001) also emphasises that the lack of

personal individual contact in the experience of many students may well be a significant contributing factor to transitional difficulties.

Participants within the current research also made a considerable amount of comments on the lack of ability to cope with the transition and with the workload. These findings resonate with previous literature including Williams et al. (2008) who also identify transitional difficulties where the problems are associated with the need to 'step up' to the demands and experiences and increased autonomy of the expected workload.

Lack of ability to cope with the transition could be an area for further research to view the current position of Year 11 students. At present when Year 11 students complete their GCSE examinations they have a final 'signing off' day usually at the end of June. This is followed by an extended summer holiday before returning in September to commence new courses including A Levels. I would suggest that the Year 11 students could return to school after completing of the GCSE examinations and begin the transition into A Level studies. Teaching should not be on the content of the examination syllabus but could focus on teaching research skills, extended essay writing, giving an introduction to A Level subjects and familiarisation with expectations of A Level studies and familiarisation of new learning environments. This would reflect the current position of Year 12 students who return to lessons in the middle of June after summer examinations providing a further 5 weeks of teaching before the end of the summer term.

The above views were highlighted in earlier research by Drew (2001) commenting if students are to be effectively prepared they need to be introduced to typical approaches to learning, learning how to manage large quantities of independent learning, and developing skills to function within the new environment.

On reflection of my own teaching practice the current research has provided me with greater insight into the transitional difficulties identified by many learners. It will enable me to further develop my own mentoring skills and developing different ways of identifying and helping individual students overcome transitional difficulties hopefully leading to a happier and more academically successful experience when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. Although

this was an exploratory area of research aimed to identify transitional difficulties for learners when moving from GCSE to A Level studies I have developed what I term the ‘OUCH approach’ that I now use within my own teaching and have shared with colleagues. The approach has two aspects, one for students and one for teaching. Hopefully using this simple approach will be beneficial for some learners.

For students:

Organisation – ensuring that all students are organised with their work, folders are clearly labelled and work in the right place. Organised in terms of time management to ensure that can keep up to date with work and homework. Using personal study periods (free periods) effectively.

Understanding – understanding what is expected of them in terms of workload, homework, syllabus requirements, commitment, and understanding the expectations and demands of achieving good grades.

Challenge – enabling students to challenge themselves to work to the best of their ability.

Help – to acknowledge that help will always be available but also having confidence to ask for help. It only takes one question.

For teaching:

Organisation – ensuring that all lessons are well planned and organised to meet the needs of students and to differentiate between abilities to ensure students work towards their goals.

Understanding – to gain a better understanding of individual students, their needs and aspirations and to gain greater knowledge of students with additional support needs and/or mental health issues. To be aware of the wider roles and responsibilities of students including those acting as young carers. Also, to remember that much of the terminology used may be new and unfamiliar to

students and to ensure that they understand what these terms mean and how to use the appropriately.

Challenge – to ensure that work is set that will challenge each learner, giving detailed feedback to ensure that students know what aspects of their work is right and what needs improving, importantly how to improve.

Help – being available to help students when they need it, being able to identify students that need help but don't know how to ask. Remembering that for most of these students A Levels are a new way of learning, new subjects and new expectations. Help often needs to go beyond teaching the subject but helping can be as simple as giving a student someone to talk to, someone who will listen without being judgemental.

As one colleague recently commented “we take for granted and assume these young people are coping but, in reality many of them are not. Just a little bit of extra help and understanding can go a long way. Using the OUCH approach seems to be having a positive affect”.

Conclusion

The initial literature review enabled the development of the conceptual framework for my own research. It has established the context of the research within the education provision for learners moving from GCSE to A Level studies. The literature review provided definitions of transition in an educational context (Miles et al. 2002; Beach, 2003). It has considered both positive views of transition (Beach, 2003; Hernandez-Martinez et al. 2011) and negative views (Osgood et al. 2002; Williams et al. 2008).

The literature review has also enabled a brief reflection on some educational policies and practices (Education and Skills Act, 2008; Laws et al. 2015). It has considered the criticisms of government reform of A Levels (Hoyles et al. 2002; Jones, 2002; Barlow, 2012) and the need to provide good quality provision of vocational courses (Spielhofer et al. 2007).

The literature review has enabled me to reflect on theories and policy issues and identify gaps in the literature which have helped develop the focus of my own research and the research questions to be investigated:

- What are the transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level Studies?
- What internal factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?
- What external factors can be identified in relation to transitional difficulties for learners in post-16 education when moving from GCSE to A Level studies?

The methodology chapter focused on combining quantitative and qualitative methods that can jointly contribute to inquiry findings through examination, explanation, confirming, refuting and/or enriching information from one approach to another (Creswell, 2003; Kanbur, 2005; Torres, 2006). A mixed-methods sequential exploratory design was used (adapted from Ivankova et al. 2006) to gather and integrate findings from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were gathered from questionnaires, meta-planning activities, focus group discussions and individual interviews.

Quantitative data were analysed using complex chi squared inferential statistical analysis. The qualitative data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) to identify expectations, positive and negative factors relating to the transition from GCSE to A Level studies. Results from quantitative and qualitative data were integrated and discussed in relation to the results generated and the empirical evidence in the literature review.

The findings show the majority of participants used in the current research identified transitional difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. Only one participant indicated that they had not experienced any transitional difficulties, reflecting positive definitions of transition as described by Miles et al. (2002), Williams et al. (2008) and Hernandez-Martinez et al. (2011). In contrast one participant indicated there were no positive experiences and transition was

viewed in totally negative perspective. These comments reflect earlier research that identified difficulties in adjustment as a problem of transition (Riele, 2004; Galton et al. 2007) where difficulties in adjustment may lead to disengagement in learning which can have subsequent negative impact on future life chances.

The range of the transitional difficulties identified reflected the individual differences of the participants themselves. There were several themes emerging from the data that were also reflected in earlier empirical evidence for example, 'difficult in coping with the transition from GCSE to A Level studies' was identified by Galton et al. (2000); Winter (2001), Lawton et al. (2004) and Riele (2004) identifying that difficulties in adjustment may lead to disengagement in learning. McQueen (2009) also emphasises the importance of integration from a sociological approach that aid the initial transitions.

A further example related to workload where 85% of participants indicated that they had found the workload considerably difficult or quite hard. These findings resonate with previous literature including Williams et al. (2008) who also identify transitional difficulties where the problems are associated with the need to 'step up' to the demands and experiences and increased autonomy of the expected workload.

Not all of the themes that emerged from the data appear to have been previously researched and as stated by Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) research within sixth form colleges as an under-researched sector of educational provision. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) identified two significant gaps in the literature; firstly, they suggest there are few studies on post-compulsory education and none on sixth form colleges. Secondly, they identify a dislocation between research studies of institutional culture and practices and new academic interests in learning which fail to identify and address possible issues relating to transitional difficulties faced by some learners.

The aim of the current research was to identify some of the transitional difficulties faced by some participants when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. I may have outlined many of these transitional difficulties identified by the research participants but have not identified ways to resolve these this would be an area for further research. Nonetheless this research has identified many

transitional difficulties and as previous research has shown, the difficulties faced by learners can have considerable negative impact on their engagement in learning and academic outcome.

Identifying areas for further possible research

Within the current research there have been three main areas identified for further possible research. The first related to identifying ways to resolve or reduce the transitional difficulties identified by learners when moving from GCSE to A Level studies. The second relates to the need to do more to understand the additional transitional difficulties faced by young people when they have joint roles as learners within education but also when they are young carers for family members. Thirdly, there is a great need to be able to identify and work with learners having additional transitional difficulties associated with mental health issues. This appears to be a growing area of concern in terms of the increasing number of young people identified with and suffering from mental health issues and how these are impacting on their educational experiences and outcome.

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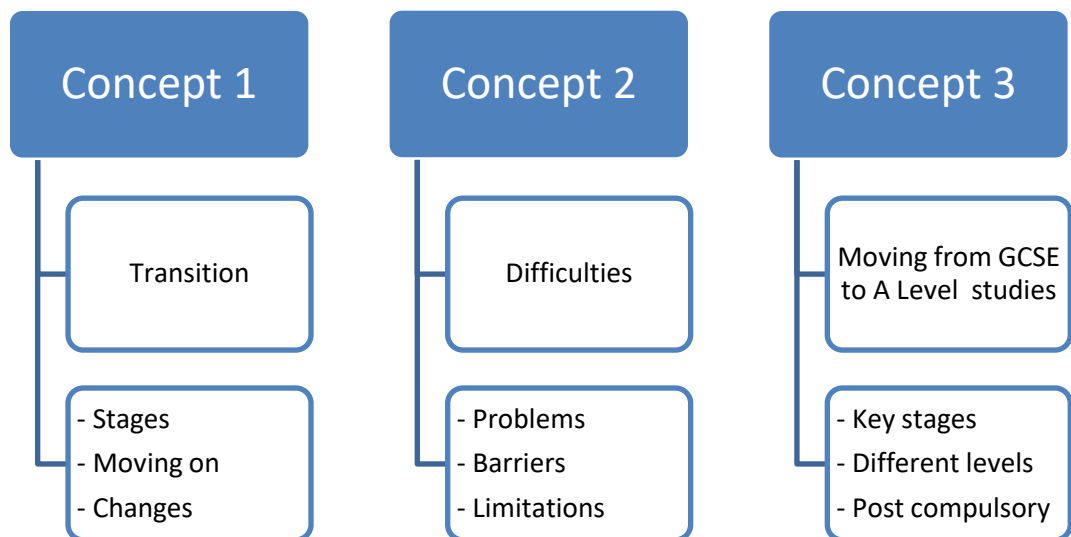
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Appendix 1 – Search Strategy

To develop the literature review a search strategy was used to identify key concepts and terms to enable an in-depth and comprehensive search of published work. The research topic ‘Transitional Difficulties in Post-16 Education: Moving from GCSE to A Level Studies’ was broken down into three concepts: Transition, Difficulties, and Moving from GCSE to A Level studies to enable a broad search of existing literature.



Appendix 2 – Online Databases used in search strategy

The search strategy focused on textbooks, professional journals and online resources together with hand-searching which then enabled narrowing of the focus of the search to more specialist and relevant research articles. The inclusion criteria focused on: research within UK educational systems; transition on key educational stages; and possible barriers, problems and difficulties with transition. The exclusion criteria consisted of: research conducted in educational systems outside the UK; research that was outdated; and research into transition for learners with special educational needs (this is recognised as a very important area for research but is beyond the scope of this current project).

Places to search	Terms/ Concepts	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Comments
British Educational Index	1, 2 and 3	Relevant to key stages	Non-UK education system	Several useful articles
EBSCO Educational Database	1, 2 and 3	Key stages/ relevant to transition/barriers	Non-UK education systems/Special Educational Needs research	Several revisits needed. Useful articles to read
Education-Line	1, 2 and 3	Transitional difficulties	Non-UK education systems/Special Educational Needs research	Useful articles printed
ERIC	1, 2 and 3	Relevant key stages	Non-UK education systems/too dated	Useful links to other sites
Intent Connect	1, 2 and 3	Education and Social Research	Non-UK education systems/wrong age groups	Useful links to other researchers/articles printed
JSTOR Arts and Sciences	1, 2 and 3	Education and transition	Non-UK education systems/Arts	Useful articles and links to other researchers
PsycINFO	1, 2 and 3	Theoretical approaches and education	Not focused on education	Revisits needed, useful articles to read

Appendix 3 – Questionnaire 1

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. Remember you have the right to withdraw at any stage and do not need to complete the questions.

Read the following questions carefully and circle the answer which you consider most accurate for yourself.

1. How do you feel you have coped with the transition (change/shift) from GCSE to A Level studies?

Very Badly	Not That Well	OK	Quite Well	Very Well
1	2	3	4	5

2. Do you feel you have received a lot of support in your transition to A Levels studies?

Not At All	Not That Much	OK	Quite a Lot	A considerable Amount
1	2	3	4	5

3. How difficult have you found the work load at A Level compared to GCSE?

Considerably difficult	Quite Hard	OK	Not too bad	Not difficult
1	2	3	4	5

4. How much effort do you feel you have put into your work at A Level compared to GCSE Level?

None	Not Much	OK	Quite A Lot	A Considerable Amount
1	2	3	4	5

5. How well have you used your private study time (free periods) at A Level?

Not At All	Very Little	About Half	Quite A Lot	Very Effectively
1	2	3	4	5

6. Have you experienced any difficulties outside of Sixth Form that have caused you problems with your studies e.g. family issues?

Considerable Problems	A Few Issues	Ok	Not Many	None
1	2	3	4	5

7. Has your part-time job had a negative impact on your studies at A Level?

A Considerable Amount	Quite A Lot	OK	Not Many	None
1	2	3	4	5

Alternatively please tick this box if you do not have a part-time job ☐

8. Has forming new friendship groups caused you any difficulties in the transition from GCSE to A Level studies?

A Considerable Amount	Quite A Lot	OK	Not Many	None
1	2	3	4	5

9. How stressful have you found the transition from GCSE to A Level studies?

Extremely Stressful	Quite Stressful	OK	Just A Little	Not At All
1	2	3	4	5

10. Do you feel you were sufficiently prepared for the transition from GCSE to A Levels studies?

Not At All	Partially	OK Amount	Quite A Lot	Fully Prepared
1	2	3	4	5

11. Did you do any summer work for your new A Level courses e.g. research, reading, finding the syllabus etc.

None	Very Little	OK Amount	Quite A Lot	A Considerable Amount
1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire. Your responses will be very helpful. Please feel free to ask any questions you might have.

Appendix 4 – Questionnaire 2

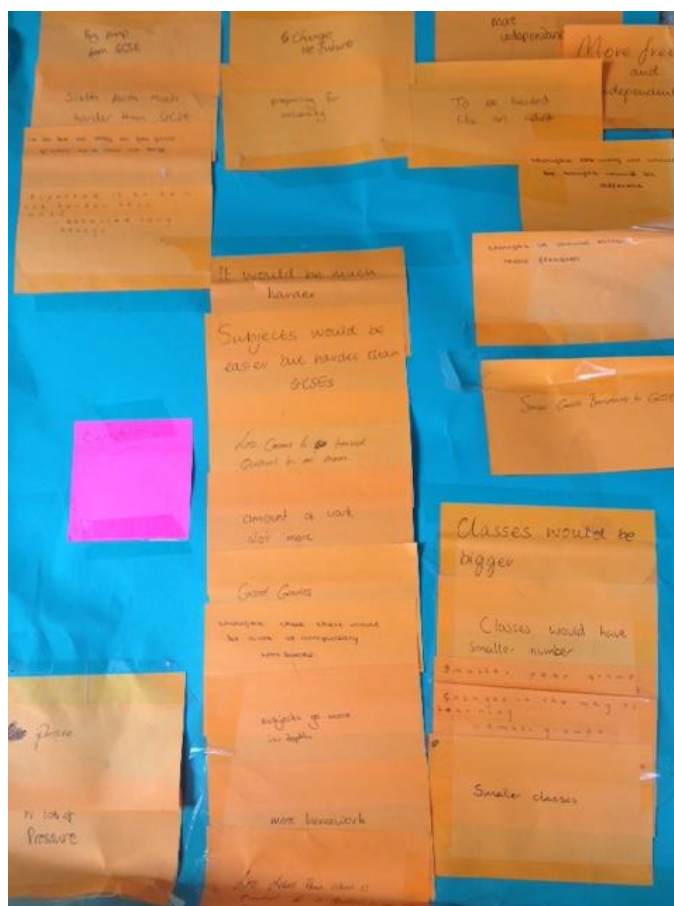
Question 1 – How well do you feel you have coped with the changes from GCSE to A Level Studies? Please give as much detail as possible.

Question 2 – What has been beneficial/helpful to you as you have moved from GCSE to A Level Studies? Please give as much information as you can.

Question 3 – What has caused problems/barriers/difficulties when moving from GCSE to A Level studies? Please feel free to expand your comments.

Question 4 – How much effort do you feel you have actually put into all of your work since moving from GCSE to A Level Studies? Please give further detail and explanation for your comments.

Appendix 5 – Samples of students' responses to meta-planning activities



Appendix 6 –The Chi-squared table SourceWWW.STATISTICSMENTOR.COM

	0.995	0.99	0.975	0.95	0.90	0.10	0.05	0.025	0.01	0.005
df	---	---	0.001	0.004	0.016	2.706	3.841	5.024	6.635	7.879
=1										
2	0.010	0.020	0.051	0.103	0.211	4.605	5.991	7.378	9.210	10.597
3	0.072	0.115	0.216	0.352	0.584	6.251	7.815	9.348	11.345	12.838
4	0.207	0.297	0.484	0.711	1.064	7.779	9.488	11.143	13.277	14.860
5	0.412	0.554	0.831	1.145	1.610	9.236	11.070	12.833	15.086	16.750
6	0.676	0.872	1.237	1.635	2.204	10.645	12.592	14.449	16.812	18.548
7	0.989	1.239	1.690	2.167	2.833	12.017	14.067	16.013	18.475	20.278
8	1.344	1.646	2.180	2.733	3.490	13.362	15.507	17.535	20.090	21.955
9	1.735	2.088	2.700	3.325	4.168	14.684	16.919	19.023	21.666	23.589
10	2.156	2.558	3.247	3.940	4.865	15.987	18.307	20.483	23.209	25.188
11	2.603	3.053	3.816	4.575	5.578	17.275	19.675	21.920	24.725	26.757
12	3.074	3.571	4.404	5.226	6.304	18.549	21.026	23.337	26.217	28.300
13	3.565	4.107	5.009	5.892	7.042	19.812	22.362	24.736	27.688	29.819
14	4.075	4.660	5.629	6.571	7.790	21.064	23.685	26.119	29.141	31.319
15	4.601	5.229	6.262	7.261	8.547	22.307	24.996	27.488	30.578	32.801
16	5.142	5.812	6.908	7.962	9.312	23.542	26.296	28.845	32.000	34.267
17	5.697	6.408	7.564	8.672	10.085	24.769	27.587	30.191	33.409	35.718
18	6.265	7.015	8.231	9.390	10.865	25.989	28.869	31.526	34.805	37.156
19	6.844	7.633	8.907	10.117	11.651	27.204	30.144	32.852	36.191	38.582
20	7.434	8.260	9.591	10.851	12.443	28.412	31.410	34.170	37.566	39.997
21	8.034	8.897	10.283	11.591	13.240	29.615	32.671	35.479	38.932	41.401
22	8.643	9.542	10.982	12.338	14.041	30.813	33.924	36.781	40.289	42.796
23	9.260	10.196	11.689	13.091	14.848	32.007	35.172	38.076	41.638	44.181
24	9.886	10.856	12.401	13.848	15.659	33.196	36.415	39.364	42.980	45.559
25	10.520	11.524	13.120	14.611	16.473	34.382	37.652	40.646	44.314	46.928
26	11.160	12.198	13.844	15.379	17.292	35.563	38.885	41.923	45.642	48.290
27	11.808	12.879	14.573	16.151	18.114	36.741	40.113	43.195	46.963	49.645
28	12.461	13.565	15.308	16.928	18.939	37.916	41.337	44.461	48.278	50.993
29	13.121	14.256	16.047	17.708	19.768	39.087	42.557	45.722	49.588	52.336
30	13.787	14.953	16.791	18.493	20.599	40.256	43.773	46.979	50.892	53.672
40	20.707	22.164	24.433	26.509	29.051	51.805	55.758	59.342	63.691	66.766
50	27.991	29.707	32.357	34.764	37.689	63.167	67.505	71.420	76.154	79.490
60	35.534	37.485	40.482	43.188	46.459	74.397	79.082	83.298	88.379	91.952
70	43.275	45.442	48.758	51.739	55.329	85.527	90.531	95.023	100.425	104.215
80	51.172	53.540	57.153	60.391	64.278	96.578	101.879	106.629	112.329	116.321
90	59.196	61.754	65.647	69.126	73.291	107.565	113.145	118.136	124.116	128.299
100	67.328	70.065	74.222	77.929	82.358	118.498	124.342	129.561	135.807	140.169

Appendix 7 – Transcript of students' responses within focus group discussions

After each Focus Group completed the three activities described above, they were encouraged to sit together in a group and take part in a discussion regarding the activities. I initiated the discussions and then reduced my contribution to enable the participants to discuss within their group their own views and opinions.

Focus Group 1 – **initial question asked: What have you discovered from taking part in these activities?** Response from one participant “that there are a lot of things we think about that are the same and a lot of things that we think about that are different”.

Researchers question “Why do you think that is?” As more participants contributed to the conversation their responses were listed below:

“Because we are about the same age and we like the same things”

“Because we all want to do well in our A Levels”

“We all have lots of friends or want to make lots more friends”

“Most of us get on with each other there are just a few people who don't get on. It's like the same with teachers, there are some you get on better with and some you don't”.

“I think that also depends of how the teachers are with you, some give you a lot of time, they give loads of feedback on essays and stuff but there are others that lose your work or it gets handed in and never marked and returned”.

“Yes, it's like some teachers give us loads of homework to do and others don't give much. Sometimes it depends on whether they want to spend their time marking it or not”.

“I like the feedback because it helps me focus on what I need to do to improve my work. Some teachers put on the homework ‘points to improve’ and they kind of tell you what you need to do to improve your work”.

“If you do well and get good grades and marks it motivates you to do even more and to get a higher mark than your mates”.

“I like that some teachers do a lot of work going through past papers and stuff then telling you how to answer the question, what the examiners are looking for and stuff. I did not realise you had to write so much at AS level, I thought it would just be like GCSE and you could blag your way through even when you don’t know the answers, but you can’t do that at AS level you need to know the stuff”.

Researcher question: Why do you think there are differences in your responses for the activity?

“Because some of us work harder than others” (this was followed by laughter from everyone)

“I work really hard but I don’t get good grades”

“That’s because in the test you answered the wrong question”

“I think there are differences because of what is expected of us. My parents want me to do really well, get good grades and go to uni, but some of my mates well their parents are not really that bothered”.

“I think we are different because I have to stay late ever day till my Dad can pick me up on the way home from work. I work in the study room and get all my homework done. But I still chat and mess around with my mates, but I get my work done. Some

people just sit in there and do no work they just mess around and distract everyone else”.

“I think it’s good that some things are different because it makes you feel more independent, like in Year 11 we all had to do the same stuff, the same lessons, wear the same clothes but now it’s like we can wear what we want. Yeah it’s definitely about being different because you are being yourself”.

Researcher question: “Looking at the first activity based on expectations, which would you now consider to be the most important comments?”

“We put most votes for friendships”

“Yeah, but if you look at it we put more votes for friendships but we put more comments for academic achievement”.

“You can still have friends and do well in college with all your grades and stuff”

“But you can have friends and not need to go to college”.

“We gave enjoyment 3 votes, we are all here to enjoy ourselves but we want to work as well, we can go to lessons and stuff and still enjoy ourselves like pizzas at lunchtime”.

“We did not give learning any votes but I suppose at the end of the day we are all actually here to learn. We don’t know the stuff so we need to be here to learn especially if we want to go to uni”.

“I would agree so I suppose we should say learning is the most important”.

There was whole group agreement on this view.

“Playing golf”

“You only said that because you are trying to get a job in the PE department, most of us don’t even want to play golf so that’s not the most important”.

“We put loads of comments for friends and support but I suppose they are like the same as getting on with people, why did we not put them all together?”

“So, is having friends and getting on with people the most important?”

“I think it’s important to have friends and have support from friends and other people cause it helps you focus and there is someone there for you when things go bad”.

“Why did we write about revision and put it in a group and then not vote on it?”

“I don’t suppose we thought revision was important, but I suppose it is especially before the exams when some teachers go out of their way to put on lots of revision sessions”.

“Yeah they do them after school and at lunchtime for people who don’t want to stay after school or can’t because of the buses”.

“Are we now changing our mind, should we move the 6 votes we put on friends to revision?”

“Yes I think we should, but what we could do is move 5 votes to revision and leave one vote for friends”.

“No if you think about it friends will always be there so revision should really be the most important as we need to get through the year and pass our exams especially if we want to be back next year”.

“Yes I agree, but let’s leave all the votes for revision because it really is important. I’ve already been going to lunchtime revision sessions is one subject and it’s been really helpful. I’m going to keep going right up till the exams. It’s like as there is only a few of us she teaches in a different way and helps us all understand. We don’t feel stupid if we have to ask again”.

“Yes so we are all agreed we will say that revision is most important”.

Researcher “That’s fine, you can move the votes (coloured dots) if you want to.

Finally, what do you think are the most important comments from the final activity, the negative factors?”

“We put stress and social life. But sometimes it’s the social life that causes you stress like my family when they want me to go and visit relatives and I try to explain that I need to finish my homework, they won’t let me then the teachers get stroppy because I cannot hand in my work because I’ve not done it. That makes me stressed and it’s not even my fault”.

“I’m lucky my parents are really supportive. If I have a lot of work to do my mum will make me drinks and give me stuff to eat if I’m working late. But I still get stressed about other stuff it’s like no matter how hard I try I just cannot get my grades up to a C in chemistry”.

“We also put a group for teachers but some of them are not that bad, it’s just a few and even then it’s only when you don’t do your work on time or you chat too much in lesson. Most of them are really helpful. If the language they use is confusing, it’s only because they know the stuff and we are still learning and if you don’t know what they mean you can always go back and ask”.

“We put 4 votes for distractions but I can’t really make much comment because it’s usually me that is distracting everyone else”.

“Yes and you can always find somewhere else to work, in the library or at home”

“So would we all agree that perhaps stress is actually the most important rather than teachers or distractions?”

“Yes I think we would all agree on that”.

Researcher “Thank you all, your comments have been very interesting. Thank you also for completing the activities. Does anyone have any questions? Also, can you confirm that you are all happy for me to use your responses, I would remind you that you still have the right to withdraw if you do not want your responses to be used.

There were no questions and everyone was happy for me to use their data. The discussion time was kept relatively short as I was aware of the time and that most students would shortly have to attend their next lesson.

Appendix 8 – Sample of completed Questionnaires

Questionnaire 16

How do you feel you have coped with the change from GCSE studies to A Level studies?
Please give as much detail as you can.

It's like really stressful you get all this nagging from your teachers for not doing the work then they contact home and you get it in the neck when you get back. Everyone is just out to nag even more. I don't see what all the fuss is about.

What has been beneficial/helpful to you as you have moved from GCSE's to A Level studies?

Nothing. I get to hang out loads with my mates because no one really bothers if you go to lessons or not. As long as you go to registration they think you are in college. It's like as long as someone sees you playing football then its ok because you do Sport as a subject.

Missing lessons?

What has caused problems/barriers/difficulties moving from GCSE's to A Level studies?

Stress
workload

Stress. Everyone nagging. Parents moaning that I should get a part time job. Teachers moaning because I don't do the homework. There is just too much work to do all the time, it's like the workload is huge. I didn't expect it to be this much more than GCSE's because you only do 3 subjects not like the 9 GCSE's. Then I do even less work because I have probably got a bit behind. Bunking off lessons means I have missed loads of stuff. But I can copy my mates work because he is a prat.

How much effort do you feel you have actually put into all of your work since starting A Level studies? Please explain the reasons for this.

Not much, sometimes I can't be bothered. I did no work for my GCSE's and got brilliant grades, all A's and B's so I don't see that I need to do much now.

Negative attitude
limited effort
not coping!

Questionnaire 27

How do you feel you have coped with the change from GCSE studies to A Level studies?
Please give as much detail as you can.

I have found A Levels a lot harder than I anticipated. I have realised that once you leave a classroom ^{workload} you need to spend more time on each subject so you learn everything that is needed. I am feeling a lot of stress, it's more difficult than I expected.

stress

What has been beneficial/helpful to you as you have moved from GCSE's to A Level studies?

I have been more independent and have looked after and organised all my work and folders. Family have also helped with questions and work.

positive

What has caused problems/barriers/difficulties moving from GCSE's to A Level studies?

New people. New teachers. New environment. It took a while to find my way around the new college buildings but that's a lot easier now. I find most of the work too challenging, it's a lot more difficult than I expected, it was such a jump up from GCSE's to A Levels. If I was stuck before I just asked the teachers for help, now I find that too difficult because I don't want to appear stupid in front of the rest of the class. I feel I am falling behind because there are some things I just don't understand but I don't know how to go about asking for help. I have not really made any friends so I have no one to turn to for help.

work load
challenging

no.
friends

How much effort do you feel you have actually put into all of your work since starting A Level studies? Please explain the reasons for this.

No as much, thought it would be like GCSE but have realised more effort is needed. I still don't understand what I support to do in RE because the teacher really does not help. I feel isolated in her lessons.

effort

Mostly negative
but positive outlook.

Question 39

How do you feel you have coped with the change from GCSE studies to A Level studies? Please give as much detail as you can.

Coping
No stress

I feel that I have coped quite well with the change from GCSE studies to A Levels. I'm aware that it requires more time and effort but I'm prepared for that and I'm not getting stressed. Although I may get more stressed before the exams, they are really important for my future, I would hate to fail or get really bad grades.

Positive

What has been beneficial/helpful to you as you have moved from GCSE's to A Level studies?

Support

Having free periods to revise and work in. Support from teachers/friends/family. Late start, early finishes. Meeting new people. Using the library and study rooms whenever I want to has really helped, there is somewhere I can work but they are not always quiet and some students use as social venues not for work.

negative

What has caused problems/barriers/difficulties moving from GCSE's to A Level studies?

Workload

Having to do work all the time. The workload is huge. I have to work in every lesson and then do loads of work outside lessons just to keep up. Some teachers set regular homework and then give short class tests, once I started really working for these my marks improved, but other teachers don't really bother to set and mark work so I don't know if I am on track or falling behind.

How much effort do you feel you have actually put into all of your work since starting A Level studies? Please explain the reasons for this.

Effort

Future plans

Support friends

I always put a lot of effort into my work. You need to do this if you want good grades at the end. I am hoping to go on to University so I need to work really hard. I have some friends that also want to do well and we often study together giving each other support and being able to ask for help if there is something I don't understand.

Positive

Positive
only workload negative

Appendix 9 – Sample of Interview Transcripts

Interview 1C

***Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. Can you just confirm that you have read the consent letter and that you are happy to continue? Don't forget you can ask questions at any time and can decide to stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue.**

-Yes that ok.

***Can you confirm you are a Year 12 student and where you did your GCSE's?**

-Yes I am in Year 12 and I did my GCSE's here.

***Ok. How do you feel you are getting on with your subjects at A level?**

-Mostly ok. Yes I would say ok.

***Good. Is there any one topic you prefer to the others or any one you are getting on best with?**

-No they are all going really well.

***Since starting A Level studies what do you feel is going well and what is not going so well?**

-Everything is going well. Except perhaps I have not made any new friends. There are people I did GCSE with but they have moved elsewhere or are doing different subjects. So I don't really have that many friends. Some teachers split you up in class so you don't sit next to friends, I think it to stop people talking too much, if they sit next to someone they don't know they won't talk. But I have enough there is always someone to talk to or its ok to be on my own and work quietly

***Thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else you feel is not going as well as you expected?**

-Well there is loads of work. I mean I always did loads of work for my GCSE's but I don't think I expected there to be this much work. It's as if teachers set homework thinking you only do one subject, they forget you have homework to do for other subjects so it gets busy at times.

Positive

Positive

Independent working

Workload

lack of friends

***I can appreciate how much homework you must have to do. In general is the workload what you expected compared to GCSE's?**

positive

-Yes. But I always work hard. I am very well organised with my work and plan things carefully, I'm good at time management because I plan carefully, I do my work straight away that helps keep my up to date and I don't fall behind with any of my work.

***What do you do in your personal study periods what students often call free periods?**

independent learning

-Most of them I spend working in the library on study room. But the study room gets too noisy, people just go in there to chat rather than work. That is really annoying. Teachers should do something about this. After all the study room is for studying, there is the common room if you want to eat and chat. I sometimes go to the library but sometimes it's closed even the top area that is meant to be for sixth form students, sometimes it's used for meetings so it's closed as well. Yes I think there needs to be more quiet places to work.

*Yes I appreciate that can be difficult at times.

***Do you think you will be able to achieve your target grades at A Level?**

positive attitude

-Yes. I have good target grades, mostly A's and B's. My GCSE's were good and I expect to do the same at A level. I think I work hard and should get the grades.

***That's great. What do you want to do when you finish sixth form?**

career planned

-I want to go into a career in medicine. Go to university first then focus on something in medicine so I need good grades and high targets to get where I want to go.

***Is there anything at present that you feel might hinder or prevent you achieving your targets?**

work ethic

-Only me because I work really hard, I put in all of the effort so I can get the higher grades.

***Did you suffer from stress or pressure during your GCSE's and do you think you will get stressed in A Level studies?**

stress negative

-Yes, stress really is a problem for me. I probably put myself under so much pressure to do well, I have to work all the time at college and at home. I try to do at least 4 hours each night and lots at eh weekend. I don't have time for anything else other than studies because I need to do really well.

***How did you cope with your stress previously?**

-Not well. I ended up at the doctors, I cried a lot got ill and had to go on medication. But it was ok in the end. That's why I am working so hard now. To keep on top of my work then I won't get so stressed if I don't fall behind.

- Health issues
- Stress

***Did you fall behind with your work at GCSE?**

-Yes and no. Yes after I was off ill but only because I was ill, then I had a lot of catching up to do and that sort of made me more stressed. It's like you have to catch up with missed work but still continue doing the current work in lessons and more homework and the homework you have missed.

***It sounds very stressful. Don't forget you can talk to your teachers of form tutor. Teachers should be able to give you extra time if needed to catch up with work. It is important to look after yourself while you study.**

-Yes. I am doing ok but I know I can ask for help if needed.

***Is there anything else about sixth form that you would consider positive?**

-Yes being able to work more independently. Some teachers treat you a bit more grown up they give you guidance on what the study. They go through a topic, explain it and then expect you to do extra notes at home. That's good because I like working independently. I don't really like group work or discussions. Working independently helps me understanding things better.

Independent

***Thank you. You sound very positive about your work. Do you feel you get a lot of support for example from teachers, at home, from friends?**

-Some teachers are really supportive. When I hand in work they give me lots of encouragement and always give one or two points to improve my work. But some teachers don't seem that bothered they just sort of tick work and don't add many comments. Even when my work gets a high mark its helpful to have extra comments, it shows that they have bothered to read your work.

Support

negative

***Do you think some teachers are less supportive?**

-Yes. Because I work really hard I mostly get A's for my work but some teachers never say well done. It's just sort of expected but they give me no encouragement to continue working hard. I sometimes feel like handing in a really bad piece of work just to see if they still give me an A grade.

Pushing
at the limit

***Do you feel supported at home and by your friends?**

-My parents really support me. They are pleased that I am doing well. They give me encouragement and are just pleased that I work hard. I don't really talk that much to other people about my work.

Good
support

Some friends are kind and encourage me and say well done when I get homework back or do class tests and get good marks, others just ignore me because they cannot be bothered to work.

***Some students have mentioned transport problems. Have you found any difficulty with transport getting to and from sixth form?**

-Not really. It just takes such a long time to get across town on the bus. Yes it can be awkward sometimes but really you just get up a bit earlier and catch a bus at a time that you know will get you to college on time. There really is no excuse to be late for lessons or for registration, for some people it's just laziness they don't really want to make the effort.

***Since you started sixth form is there anything you would like changed?**

-Not really it's just that some people don't want to be here or think its ok to mess around and not do any work in the lessons or study periods. It's sad because they will not do well in their exams and it's only themselves to blame.

Reflecting back how would you describe your own experience in relation to the transition from GCSE's to A Levels?

-It's been really good. I have worked hard because I expected the work to be hard. The more you work the better exam results you will achieve. It has helped me become more independent, learning for myself. I feel I am working more as an adult than a school child. It is helping me prepare for having to work independently at university. I have lots of support from family, friends and most teachers. It's sad that just a few friends and teachers seem to expect me to always get A grades and then don't even say well done. I have to work really hard to get the grades I get, I don't want praise but sometimes a bit of encouragement really helps especially when the topic has been difficult. It's also good that some teachers stretch me that bit further, they set high targets for me. Even when I get an A grade from my homework one or two teachers still give me pointers and advise of what I can do to improve my work, that really helps. It's not just getting an A, its understanding why I got the grade and what more I can do to reach my full potential.

Positive experiences

Independent

Support friends/family

***Thank you. Your comments are very interesting. Thinking back what would have made the transition from GCSE into A Levels easier for you?**

-Teachers in the sixth form mostly treat you like adults rather than children, but there is one teacher that I have had for RE for several years, her lessons never change, they are just the same each year, she shows a few Powerpoint slides and just tells us the topic. She does not explain or challenge my knowledge or that of others in the class. There is no difference between GCSE teaching and A Level teaching and I feel I need to be challenged more. My psychology teacher has been really tough on me, she always challenges me and the rest of the class, she teaches us the topic and encourages us to do independent work to enable us to improve our understanding, then we are shown how to apply our knowledge to exam questions and finally how to improve our work to gain even higher

challenging but helpful

levels of understanding. The work has been very difficult at times but I know I have learnt a lot in her lessons, not just on the topic but on techniques for improving answers to exam questions. I think there is a considerable difference between teachers that teach across all years in the school and those that specialise in teaching sixth form only, they understand the need to work at a far higher level and push us to help us achieve our full potential.

achievement targets potential

I have suffered very badly from stress and just knowing there are one or two people in college that I can talk to when things get bad is really helpful. Stress is something most students suffer from at some point in their A Levels, some cope better than others but some like myself need a bit of extra support at times.

Stress - only red negative aspect

***Thank you so much for your open and honest answers. Thank you for giving so much of your time. Is there anything you would like to ask before we finish?**

-Yes you mentioned at the start confidentiality? Will my name be used?

*As discussed everything you have said will only be used for my research. Nothing will be discussed with other staff here or with any students. Your name will not be disclosed anywhere. Remember you have the right to withdraw and I will not then use your work.

-That's ok. I don't mind as long as my name will not be included.

***Thank you. You have my reassurances on that. For the interviews I will only refer to 'participant 1' 'participant 2' 'participant 3' etc. Are you happy with that?**

-Yes.

*Once again thank you for your time and assistance. Good luck with your future studies.

Interview 1B

***Can you confirm that you have read the consent letter and that you are happy to continue? Don't forget you can ask questions at any time and you can decide to stop the interview at the time if you do not wish to continue.**

-Yes that's ok.

***Can you confirm you are a Year 12 student and where you did your GCSE's?**

-Yes I'm in Year 12 and I did my GCSE's here.

***How have you settled into sixth form?**

-It's been good, I have lots of friends from Year 11 and I have made new friends that have just started in Year 12.

Friendship +

***How important do you feel that it is to have friends while you study for you're A Levels?**

-It's great to have lots of friends then you always have someone to hand around with during free periods and lunch time.

***Have you taken part in any of the social activities that have gone on in the sixth form like disco's and the snow ball?**

-No because I could not be bothered to.

***How did you decide which subjects to do at A level?**

-I went to the Open Evening and talked to some of the teachers. Some subjects I have already done at GCSE like maths but others are new subjects like economics. But I had a pretty good idea before I started what they would be like.

***How do you think your subjects are going?**

-They are mostly ok but I have struggled a bit with some of them. Some teachers are more helpful than others, some sort of give you extra help if you need it or they will go over things again with you if you don't understand but some just expect you to be able to do it. I sometimes find that a bit hard.

***Have you spoken to your form tutor about some of these problems?**

-Yes, but my form tutor is not really interested, they only want to do the register and stuff, they don't really seem that bothered about my work.

***Have you had any mentoring sessions, one-to-one sessions with your form tutor and have they been helpful?**

-Yes but it's just like – here are the questions we need to go through. Then I give my answers to the questions, there is nothing else, no support or help for things I try to explain I am stuck with.

lack of support

***Perhaps you need to talk to your subject teachers, explain what you are finding difficult and ask if they can give you extra help either in the lesson or perhaps lunch time or a revision session.**

-Yes, I can try.

***What do you hope to do when you have finished sixth form?**

-I hope to go to university but I'm not sure what to study. I am looking at several universities to see what courses are like and what choices there are but there seems to be loads.

***Yes and assemblies and talks on UCAS applications will also be helpful, also if you can plan to go to visit several universities, there are also a couple of events later in the year – a trip to UEA and the higher education fair. They are organised through the sixth form and all Year 12 students attend.**

***What do you feel are perhaps the best things and worst things for you since you moved into sixth form?**

-The best is probably (hesitation) well probably the fact that I am only doing 4 subjects, that's far less than GCSE it gives you time to focus on them a bit more.

***And the worst things?**

-How much work there is. Even though it's only 4 subjects there is loads of work to do in each subject, like work in lessons and they expect you to do a lot of homework, extra reading, essays, practice past papers and stuff. Yes there is really a huge amount of work to do.

workload - negative

***Did you expect the work to be easier than it is?**

-Well (hesitation) sort of yes and no. I went to the open evening and some of the teachers did say that the work would be hard and there would be a lot to do. One also said it is a big jump from GCSE to A levels, but you just sort of listen to what they say and then move on to the next topic. It's as if

they had told us it would be hard but we did not listen or really pay attention. It's like I did not do that much for GCSE's but still got good grades and I thought A levels would be the same.

***How do you plan your work? Are you good at time management?**

-No not really. I go to most of the lessons, I've only missed a few. Then I try to do some work at home but not really that much. I am not really that organised with any of my work.

- the management
- organisation

***How much work do you think you are expected to do at home?**

-I think it was about 2 hours per night. But some teachers give you homework and some don't really bother much. I don't really do that much work out of college. I do very little at home even though we are meant to.

***What about personal study time – what students call 'free periods' how do you use them?**

-I really hang about with my mates most of the time. We get something to eat, sit and chat or if it's not raining go and kick a football about.

***On average what percentage of your personal study time do you actually spend each week doing work or homework?**

-Honestly (hesitation) well I suppose I should say lots but if I'm honest almost none. Though I did once have to finish off an essay and I did that in the free before my lesson. But I don't always do the homework. I should not really say that should I?

lack of independent work / homework

***Don't worry that's not a problem. But thank you for being so honest. Do your friends spend lots of time working in their free periods or not?**

-No, no one really bothers. It's like at GCSE we had no free time now we have a lot and it's good to get together with your mates. I support if they actually wanted us to work then they would not call them free periods and we would have to go to more lessons or the library or study room or something like that.

***You have mentioned making friends as a positive aspect of being in sixth form and the amount of work as a negative aspect. Is there anything else either positive or negative?**

-One positive thing is that I don't live far away and can come on my bike or walk. Some of the other students moan because the busses take too long and they are sometimes late to lessons and the teachers have a go at them for being late. Another negative thing is the food. Sometimes at break you end up spending the whole of the break time queuing up for food, then when you do get it the bell goes and you don't actually have time to eat it. Some of the teachers won't let you in the class

No travel issues

but some are fine if you just ask first if it's ok to eat your food. Some teachers understand how long we wait others are just not bothered and tell us we cannot eat in the class. They could do with more people serving the food at break and lunchtime.

***Yes, I have heard those comments before. Maybe it's something you could take up with the student council, ask them to discuss it with the sixth form management team.**

***How confident do you feel you are with your A level studies? Do you think you will achieve your predicted grades?**

-No. Because I did well in my GCSE's I have high target grades mainly B's. But I don't think I will get them. Because it's too hard also perhaps because I am a bit lazy. I could work harder. As we said before I could use my free periods to catch up with my work and to do homework. If I put in more effort I could probably do better. So I suppose I am responsible for my work and if I don't do well it's because I should have done more.

limited effort
with work
recognised responsibility

***Do you then think you are solely responsible for the outcome of your studies, for example your exam results?**

-Yes I have to be. It's like at GCSE if you don't do well you just blame the teachers but now I suppose we have to take responsibility for ourselves. The teachers do their job and it's up to me to do what they say, to do the work they tell us and I suppose then I will get it right for my exams. At the end of the day I know I have to work if I want to pass my exams.

- blame
- responsibility
- hard

***At the moment do you think you will pass with good grades?**

-Yes (hesitation) well no not really. I suppose it's up to me to do loads more work than I have. I suppose I should use this as a wake-up call I know I am behind at the minute, my work is not as good as it could be and I'm really the only one that can change that.

- independent

***Do you feel you get support at home?**

-Yeah it's like my parents could make me go out and get a part time job. I could do that with my studies, but they say it's ok as long as I work hard and get the grades to go to university. But they would be fine if I wanted a job. Yes they do support me and they will buy me things if I say I need them. So they give me support and don't pressure me too much. I suppose I am lazy really, lots of my mates have to do part time jobs to earn money and they have to fit that in with college work but I don't bother.

no part work
parental support

***Have you felt stressed or pressured at any time with you AS studies?**

-No not really, but then we have not done mock exams yet. I suppose it will get a bit harder then. I did not really get stressed with GCSE's and I thought it would be about the same now. But perhaps I

not stressed
in GCSE's.

will get stressed if my mock exams are not good. Then my parents might say something then I will have to work harder. The only pressure I feel is when I get behind with my work but that's my fault for not doing it and not handing in homework and stuff when asked. I might get more stressed after the mocks but hopefully not. I don't support I take it that seriously to get stressed out.

***If you were talking to a Year 11 student about sixth form, what would you say to them?**

-I would (hesitation) I suppose I would tell them that they have to be prepared to do a lot of work. Its far harder than they think. Everyone thinks it will be just like GCSE's but doing less subjects. What you don't really realise is how hard it is, how much extra work you need to do in lessons and at home. I thought it would be easy but it really is not. The workload is not what you expect. But the teachers are really helpful. They help you find out information and give you extra help if you ask them. I think you are treated a bit more like an adult in sixth form. You just have to grow up and be more responsible for your own work.

- workload
+ teachers help/ul
+ treated like adult

Reflecting back on your own experience, how would you describe your overall experience in relation to the transition from GCSE's to A Levels?

-I think (hesitation) that I have been too laid back. I sailed through GCSE's with not much effort and I thought it would be the same. I have made very little effort to do any work and I suppose it is just OK to blame others like the teachers, if you don't do well, you just tell your parents that the teachers were not very good, or that they have not taught that part of the course. I suppose that might work a bit but I think I will do badly in all my mocks and I can't really blame all of the teachers. (Hesitation) I suppose the main thing is that the work is far harder than I expected, you do fewer subjects that GCSE's but the work is really much harder. You have to do so much more on your own, you have to find things out, do your own research, but the teachers will give you extra help it's just that I don't bother to ask. I think if I could start the year again I would take a different approach, if I worked far harder at the start I would not have got behind with the work also if I asked for help when I did not understand I would probably be able to keep up with the work. I suppose at the end of the day if I fail the year it's my own fault.

- negative view

***Thank you. Your comments are very interesting. Thinking back what would have made the transition from GCSE into A Levels easier for you?**

-Lots of my mates have told me I need to do more work. Teachers also tell me off for not doing the homework but I always give excuses and just don't bother to do the work. I suppose I need to grow up a bit. Lots of people are really trying to support and encourage me like my parents, my mates and teachers, but I have not really bothered to listen to them up till now. I suppose if I think about it I am

Support
friends/
family

messing up my own work and also encouraging my mates to mess around too much and not focus on their work. It's like if it's sunny outside I try to encourage them to go out and play football even when some of them moan that they have got work to do, so if I'm honest I am wasting my own time and theirs especially at lunchtime when they want to finish their homework and stuff. Also I don't think I was prepared enough for the jump from GCSE's to A Levels. Things like writing essays, no one really showed us or explained to us how these have been done, it's like one teacher has one method and another teacher says something else, but I suppose different subjects need different methods. Also everyone goes on about GCSE grades and the grades you are expected to get at A Level but no one actually explained that you could actually fail. *

honesty

***Thank you for being so honest in your answers. I think that is about all we have time for. Is there anything you would like to ask me?**

-No not really. Actually it's been good because it has made me realise that I do need to start taking my work more seriously and work harder if I want to pass my exams.

*Once again thank you for your time. You have given some very honest and insightful comments.